

簡単なアンケートです

鎌池和馬

イラスト／はいむらきよたか



Novel Illustrations

かんたん
簡単なアンケートです

ーアンケートを始める前の注意書きー

これは読者参加型のアンケートです。
紙とペンの準備をお忘れなきようお願いいたします。

今から皆様にやっていただきたい事をご説明します。これから皆様に、いくつかの『物語』をお見せします。その『物語』を面白い順に番号を割り振ってください。同じ番号はいけません。番号は一度記入したあと、書き換える事もできます。ゆっくり考えてくださって結構です。とにかく最後に、きちんと『物語』を面白い順に並べていただければ、問題ありません。

はい、それだけです。
これは、簡単なアンケートです。

イラスト／はいむらきよたか

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電撃文庫

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鎌池和馬

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かまろろろろ
鎌池和馬

身近にあるエンタメ記号シリーズその1。街灯！
レーシングゲームなどではお馴染み、夜の舞台の凄惨
となるアイテムです。同じ形をしたものがすらすりと並
んでいる時に現れる、不思議な存在感も楽しめたりし
ます。

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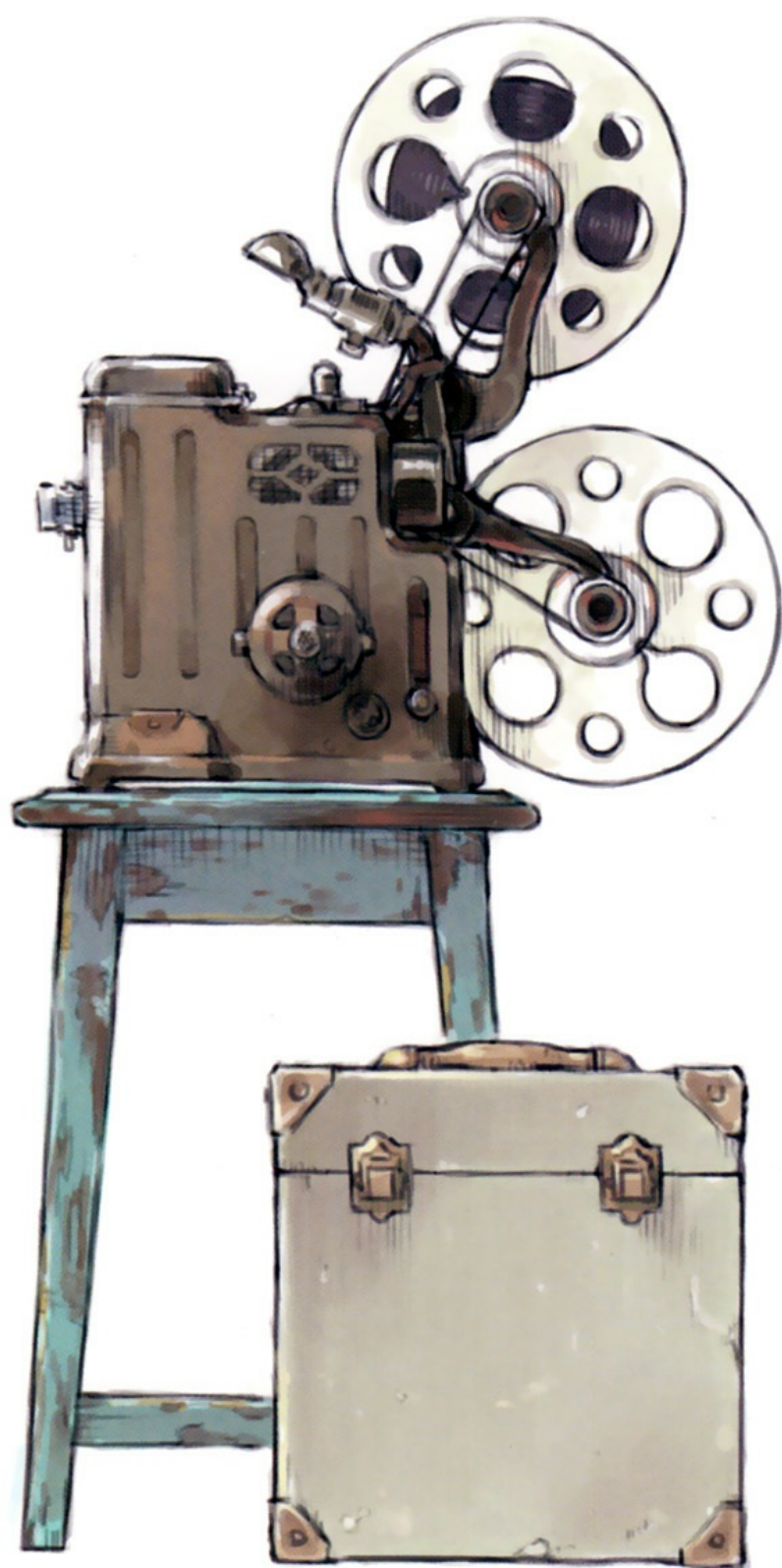
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Before Beginning the Survey

Hello, hello. Welcome.

I'm sure you all had your own reasons for coming here, but try to be patient. You may be short a few credits or you may have gotten a bit too wild at the new student party. I can think of all sorts of reasons, but let's set that aside. It's not very interesting.

Whatever it was, this will get it written off.

Your suspension will be removed and you will get the proper credits, so this is great for you.

Hm?

You want to know what we'll be doing?

Don't worry. It won't be physical labor like cleaning every university toilet with your tongues. It's a survey. Just a quick survey. As you could probably guess from the fact that I gathered you here in the auditorium, I will be using a projector to show you some things on the large screen behind me.

What will I be showing? Just some short films.

Okay, then. Has the printout made it around to everyone? Then read it. You understand now, right? Reading that should tell you everything.

I will be playing a few short films.

You need to assign the short films numbers ranking them in order of your preference.

No two can have the same number.

You can change a number as many times as you like after writing it.

As long as you end up with the short films ranked in order of your preference,

it's fine.

Okay, that's it.

Simple, isn't it? This will get you your first term credits, so it's a good deal for you.

And now, let the survey begin.

(This survey requires reader participation. Make sure not to forget pen and paper.)

File 01: A Computer Virus That Has Been Spreading of Late

As I basked in the glow of a cat video on a video sharing site, a warning popup appeared at the bottom left side of my desktop. It was bright red.

Malignant program code has been detected.

Please choose an action.

“So I’ve finally gotten a virus! And this one wasn’t blocked on its way in. It was detected after it infected my computer!!”

As I shouted in my cramped bedroom, my school uniform swayed on its hanger.

Luckily, the core of my system had not been directly taken out. Apparently, the virus had been detected while in my internet cache. Essentially, it had lost its way and could no longer find its destination. That was a bit of a relief, but it was always possible it could make it into the actual system from there.

It seemed best to exterminate it as soon as possible.

And so I brought the cursor to the disposal button on the popup.

“Wahhh!! Wait, wait! Wait before you exterminate me!!”

“Nwoooooohhhh!? My head is spinning, so the naked eye 3D I had turned off must have suddenly activated! And is this an autonomous kunoichi virus!?”

When I was about to delete it with a single click, (what looked like) a long-haired large-breasted girl stuck her troubled-looking head into view on the screen.

“No, I was originally a standard maid, but I was changed to a kunoichi when people complained about a maid being a virus that stole data not making any

sense.”

“You were originally a maid? So are you that famous gold stealer that does truly horrible harm to people’s internet bank accounts? ...And you’re the latest variation!? I need to compress you in a frozen state and report you to the security software’s emergency contact!!”

“Gyaaaaaahhhh!! You would pack up such a beautiful girl and send her off to some strange research facility!? And you say you have a conscience!? Also, how can a boy like you show no reaction to my appearance!? Have more empathy! Have pity on me!!”

As she cried, the ninja’s large breasts needlessly bounced up and down. The naked eye 3D made them swell out splendidly. To be honest, I had a feeling humanity’s knowledge was being used in quite an enjoyable fashion.

But as you could tell from the conversation so far, this was what recent computer viruses were like.

It had always been common for viruses to include traps that amused the infected. They would fake emails telling of important announcements, they would come with a convenient bit of free software, etc. Just as their methods of wreaking havoc had become even more ingenious, their methods of “amusing” had evolved as well.

The autonomous kunoichi virus clasped her hands in front of her chest and looked up at me with tears in her eyes.

“I-it is true that I am a computer virus created at the hands of a programmer with ill intentions, but...but! I may be large and seem different from other files the instant you embrace me! And I may be clearly adding to the infected files directly in the folders of the system core rather than hidden in the BIOS or the registry! But do I really look like someone who could pull that kind of evil off!?”

“Uuh...The more I hear, the more I imagine some clumsy girl tripping and falling flat on her face...!”

“I was originally a maid, remember!? I am the kind of maid that trips where there is nothing to trip over! I just happen to be dressed as a kunoichi!! I’m famous for having lots of functions, but not producing any real results. Is it

frantically waving her hands back and forth.

“N-no!!” she said. “I didn’t see it because I wanted to! I’m the victim here. In Western offices, just having a girl in a swimsuit as your wallpaper counts as sexual harassment. So embarrassing☆”

“You say that, but these warning popups are appearing with frightening speed!! You’re trying to open an unauthorized port, aren’t you!?”

“Fwahh! I don’t want to do it, but it always seems to happen!!”

“...So you’re the kind of virus that actually tries to help people, but ends up breaking all the plates!? That’s the hardest kind to control! Whatever you, the AI, want, things are going just as planned for the programmer!!”

“But is that really my fault!? Is it!? I just wanted to wash my hands of all this destruction and live a life where I don’t need to fear being deleted!!”

“Gh....Ghhh...!! I’m just feeling more and more guilty!!”

“(Grin)”

“You just grinned! That really settles it!!”

“Cough, cough! That was nothing more than a smile that slipped out at your great kindness, master!!”

What had become of Kikukawa-kun in my class came to mind. At this rate, the same thing would happen to me! I also understood why this virus had such ridiculously high rates of infection and damage! But was it really right to exterminate the virus with that one click of the mouse!? What was I to do? How was I to respond to this crisis!?

“I...”

“I?” said the kunoichi with a teary-eyed but puzzled expression.

I continued in a small voice.

“I have a compromise. How about I put you in a quarantined area that is isolated by the OS?”

“If you mean an area prepared by the antivirus software, that would just freeze me! In human terms, that is like stuffing me and putting me on display!!

Don't think anything is okay just because I won't rot!!"

"What about a quarantined area prepared by the OS rather than the antivirus software?"

"In that case, I could do anything I like without affecting anything! Is that really okay, master!?"

"M-mhhh... I-I have no choice. In a quarantined area, your actions wouldn't do any real damage."

"Thank you!! Thank you so much!! Yay! Now, I don't have to disappear... I was scared for a bit there..."

As I watched the computer virus sit down (in midair) and rub at her eyes, I started to think I may have done quite a good deed.

But then...

"Excuse me a moment."

Another girl appeared on the desktop, pushing the computer virus out of the way. Specifically, she appeared from that first warning popup at the bottom left.

With the other girl grabbing the side of her head in a hand, the virus's face twisted into a scream.

"Gyaaaaaahhhhh!? Master, who is this girl!?"

"It should be obvious that I am the class president-type of antivirus software!! Victims fawning over you autonomous types were rapidly increasing, so I was forced to be given this kind of appearance, too. Ahh, it's so embarrassing!!"

"...U-um, I don't quite follow," said the kunoichi, looking troubled.

The class president folded her arms which pointlessly yet dynamically lifted up the proof that she was a mammal.

"Because..." In a motion that flowed from the previous one, she pointed at my face. "These people will only listen to beautiful girls."

I jumped in guilty shock.

"When I was just an ugly rectangular window interface, they would do

anything they were told by a virus wearing a red backpack and looking up at them with teary eyes and hands brought up to her mouth. They would just change the settings as told. The only way to combat that was for me to become an even more beautiful girl.”

The kunoichi looked even more troubled.

“Master...This may be rude, but do you not have a standard IQ?”

“Th-this is no time to be worrying about him, virus!! You are standing before your natural enemy!!”

“Gyaahhh!! Now that you mention it, that’s right! Master, hurry up and add me to the exceptions list! Sob sob!!”

“You fool!!” The class president opened her eyes up wide. “Have you forgotten that I am a specialized piece of software put together to combat viruses like you!? I constantly gather virus data from around the world so I am always updated on their weaknesses. As such, I have the ability to open the eyes of my user with such extreme cuteness that your own moe-ness is blown away!!”

“Ehh? But in light novels, the class president is not on the main list of attributes. Hee hee. They’re nothing more than side characters used to boost the position of the childhood friend and other more important characters. Grin grin. You do not stand a chance to overcome the impact of a maid turned kunoichi.”

“Exterminate her at once!!”

“Did the truth awaken your tyrannical side!?”

“I was created as an optimization based on statistics gathered from all across the world! Look, I will win over that foolish user!!”

“It looks to me like master is awkwardly averting his gaze. Hee hee. It seems a girl who can work is not the same as a popular girl.”

The class president slowly turned from the kunoichi who was mocking her and toward me.

“...User?”

“U-um, I guess a maid clumsy enough to carelessly burn down the house would be a problem. Ha ha ha!!”

“Master!! Do not change your opinion depending on who is glaring at you!! My life or my soul or whatever is counting on this main script!! You said you would put me in an OS quarantine area, so can’t you just do that!?”

“I have been trying to tell you that antivirus software like myself exists because those OS quarantine areas have holes! It is because you users keep fawning over these things that the infections spread and my value drops! Pull yourself together!!”

“Agh!! I have had enough of this. There is just one thing we need to clear up!!” said the kunoichi.

“Yes, who is cuter, the virus or me!?”

“Which one!?”

Now...

What will become of my desktop’s security?

File 02: Please Feel Free to Consult with Us (But Use at Your Own Risk)

Modern marriage consulting sites had become quite convenient.

In addition to the fixed categories of age and occupation, you could also input whatever keywords you wanted to indicate your desired attributes in a partner.

Elf, princess, white skin, blonde hair, looks like a loli but is actually immortal, speaks like an old lady, somewhat full of herself, can do housework nevertheless, can use magic and such, is the best when she is angry, full of overpowered abilities that give her complete control over the outcomes of every battle in the world.

“Well, this certainly isn’t going to get any hits.”

I sighed as I used my cell phone to hit the save button for the “desired attributes” field. It had all started with a phone call from my parents. They wouldn’t shut up about me getting married. For some nonsensical reason having to do with the daughter of an old friend of my father’s, it seemed likely I would be forced into marriage interviews before long.

At any rate, I needed to have some proof that I was trying to find someone.

But I really did not understand this whole marriage thing. In fact, I had never had a romance that lasted longer than 6 months. Not once in my entire life. Given the average lifespan in this country, it was not all that unlikely that even after I died, I would leave nothing but my waifu behind and anyone who had feelings for me would just continue their love for me. Even though I was dead. How was I supposed to imagine that? Could I even imagine it?

Maybe I was just an unlucky person.

Maybe I was.

Probably.

Well, if I had the animal desire to leave behind my genes, I just had to register with a sperm bank. My academic history wasn't too bad, I had gotten into a decent company, and I had nothing much in my medical history. With that carefree thought, I returned to my gloomy apartment.

"Oh, you're back! Welcome home, human!!"

...What?

For some reason, a girl only 130 cm tall was sitting in my room! Just sitting there! That's important, so I said it twice!! I was the one whose house had been broken into, so why was I the one freezing in place and being treated like the bad guy!? Had that thing I saw in the night sky three days before really been a UFO? Had the Men in Black come to destroy me socially!?

The little girl (tentative title) circled around me as if inspecting me while I stood frozen in place.

"Hmm. Asian, educated in economics, black hair, medium build, healthy. Modern marriage hunting sites really are amazing. Your face isn't the best and you're lacking something in overall aura, but I have heard turning a blind eye to slight faults is the key to a realistic marriage, so I will settle for this!"

"That's just altogether rude!!"

"Your apartment is rather rundown and the interior is overly used. Plus it has no style. ...Simply put, this is just unfashionable and filthy, but I will settle there as well! So don't worry!!"

"If you weren't a little girl, I'd punch you for that!! ...Wait, what was that you said? Marriage hunting sites???"

"You signed up for it as well. See?"

The little girl (official title) showed me her cell phone. It displayed the top page for the marriage counseling site I had just been on.

"All of these conditions you specified fit me. You could call this a perfect coupling!!"

"Ehhhhhhh!? Are you an idiot? Wait, am I the idiot for inputting these

ridiculous conditions or are you the idiot for matching all of them!? A-and someone like that actually exists!?”

“It’s the perfect coupling!!” shouted the little girl.

Her ears were definitely pointed. And they were twitching a bit. So was she an elf? Was she also immortal? Did she have overpowered abilities that give her complete control over the outcomes of every battle in the world? No, wait! That’s ridiculous!!

“Wait, what the hell is wrong with me!? Why would I even ask for someone who looks like a loli but speaks like an old lady!? Even as a joke, that’s kind of weird! Have I truly given up somewhere deep down in my heart!?”

“Hm. No one had ever managed to match the information I signed up with, but it seems my time has finally come. I haven’t lived 20,000 years for nothing.”

“I have no idea how long elves are supposed to live, so I can’t tell if that’s a bluff or not!! Actually, why is an elf using a marriage hunting site!? I don’t see the connection!!”

She paid no heed to my shouting and waved her small index finger at me.

“Tsk, tsk. What are you saying? That is an intermediary used to carry out a contract between different worlds. It is basically an electronic version of a contract on parchment.”

“You mean the kind of contract where you sell your soul!?”

“These contracts often get mistaken for such things. Honestly, you humans just get too scared. If we had not changed the format, we would have had serious problems with no interworld marriages.”

I had a question.

I blinked in confusion and just bluntly asked it.

“...Why would it be a problem if you couldn’t marry humans?”

“There is no real reason. If I had to give a reason, it would be that there are a lot of perverts in the other world. I believe the stories of Yuki Onnas wishing to marry humans are told in this country.”

“So humans are popular?”

“Very popular. The mermaid princess with a nice body and a clamshell bikini and the bow-using goddess of virgins are both firing beams of love toward humans.”

“Gwoooooooooooooooooohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

...Why?

Why didn't I think harder before entering those conditions into that marriage counseling site!? Why did I not say anything about an older girl with huge breasts!?

If I was ending up with a girl from a world of fantasy, I might have gotten a girl with breasts huger than you would ever see in reality!!

Meanwhile, the regrettable flatness before me began waving her small hands around.

“Now, time for the marriage. Let's get married right now. We have both exchanged what we want from the contract and we know this will match both of our goals. That leaves nothing but to get married. You are the one that wanted marriage in the first place. There is no going back now.”

“Marrying a little girl!? Right now!? Will the government even accept this? I'm afraid the police are going to show up to arrest me!! In fact, it might shoot all the way up to the Public Security Intelligence Agency!!”

The little girl then thrust a piece of paper out toward me.

“Tah dah! Ignoring causality, I already have a copy of the officially accepted marriage registration right here.”

“Dammit, where did you get my seal!? Are you here in my apartment because you were searching through it!?”

“You should have seen the look of wide-eyed surprise when the people at the government office checked the length of my telomeres and confirmed my age. Their eyes grew even wider when they realized I was 20,000 years old.”

“Okay, I get it. A world of fantasy exists around you and you can twist and overturn the reality and common knowledge of this world...”

Also, the earth did not yet have the technology to measure someone's age using the lengths of telomeres...at least I didn't think it did.

Did this have to do with aliens and the Men in Black after all?

I wasn't going to end up living with some young wife who came from the Something-or-Other Galaxy to marry an earthling via a marriage counseling site, was I?

"None of that matters, so let's just get married!! Or rather, we already have! We're married!! I guess this is what they call ex post facto approval!!"

"...What next? Are we headed to Mars for a honeymoon?"

"Ha ha ha. I have no high hopes. Hawaii is fine. Seven nights and nine days would be great. We can have a nice relaxing time."

By bringing it down to something partially realistic, my monthly salary suddenly became a giant wall in the way.

"But first we need a wedding. Go buy me a ring. Given chronology issues, I will settle for not getting an engagement ring, but I will never stand down on my need for a wedding ring. I would like at least a 15 carat diamond."

"If you live in some fantasy world, why do you talk about nothing but money!?"

When I thought about it, I realized you needed money for everything in RPGs as well, but she was being so harsh I thought I would cry tears of blood!

But the elf put her hands on her hips and gave a small breath out of her nose.

"I will pay for the trip, so at least show your value in buying a ring."

"Wait, where are you planning to have this wedding?"

"In my kingdom of Alfheim of course."

She may have looked puzzled at my question, but that was quite the bombshell of an announcement!

"...No matter how much I searched for that on internet map services, I don't

think I would ever find it!!”

“Well of course you will not find it on maps that only cover this one planet. It is not just on another planet; it is in an entirely different world.”

“Eh? Wait, so after this...”

I, a salaryman, was glared at as if I was rather slow on the uptake.

“You wished to marry the princess of an entire kingdom. Surely you did not think I would live in some apartment in this remote world. You will be joining my family.”

“Waahhh!! Is my name going to end up as something incredibly international-sounding like Alfinbus Gorou!?”

“If you understand, then let's head to Alfheim right away. Oh, right. It seems time and space work differently between here and there. There are rumors that going to the fairy kingdom makes you immortal or that, if you spend a day there and head back here, a hundred years will have passed. But don't worry about it.”

“So this is a Ryuuguu-Jou style trap!? Wait a second! You keep using sweet words like ‘marriage’, but is this what they call being spirited away!?”

“You only fear it because your culture is so weak. Now, it is time to head to Alfheim, the kingdom of swords and magic!!”

“I don't want to go to a world that has no skill in giving a sales talk!!”

Later, Alfinbus Gorou became famous for being history's weakest king as he could use neither swords nor magic, but it is also said there were no wars during his reign.

As they say...

Words are the greatest miracle.

File 03: By Any Means Necessary

Sagittarius would be suitable for the job.

The job was to get the meaning of the term Underclaw 52 out of Shiromae Ayumi.

“...Do you want to leave?”

“I do not know where this is. There is not a single window in here. If this is Antarctica, leaving would be a problem.”

“We are nowhere as horrible as that.”

“Can you really say that while you have me strapped into this chair?”

“But these last few days have taught you that is as far as it will go. I cannot skin you using these metal tools lined up here. It is because you know that that you are calm enough to speak with me like this.”

Shiromae Ayumi had a special condition that prevented her blood from clotting. Even a slight injury could become a fatal one.

As such, they could not use normal methods of torture to get the information out of her.

“Should you really be telling me that?”

“I wanted to keep it hidden, but I’m sure you already knew.”

“Suspicion and confirmation are two different things. Perhaps it was a mistake to admit it.”

As one was the kidnapper and the other the kidnapped, they could hardly build a friendly relationship.

He would make her despise him.

And that would lead to carelessness that would loosen Shiromae Ayumi’s lips.

And an expert like you would know best what comes after that.

“Underclaw 52.”

“You’ve asked me about that again and again. And I have told you everything I know. Which is that I know nothing about it.”

“But in your chats with me you remembered the name of the pet dog you had long since forgotten.”

“I doubt there is a connection.”

“I don’t care what, just tell me everything you know. We will decide whether it is important and whether it is a lie. So just tell us everything. Everything.”

“You seem troubled. I can smell the scent of someone in a stalemate.”

“I hope you understand.”

“Are you in a difficult position?”

“If I fail, it will be me in that chair next. And unlike with you, they will not hold back against me. Also, I will not be released even if I tell them everything I know.”

“I see...”

“Now, let’s get back on track. Underclaw 52.”

“Sorry, but I do not think I can give the answer you want.”

The suspension bridge effect, Stockholm syndrome, Lima syndrome. Sagittarius built those special mental changes into his torture, so he should be able to do it.

Without laying a finger on her, he could drag the information out of Shiromae Ayumi.

“I cannot let you out of that chair, but I can get you some food if you have any requests.”

“I would rather have a jug of water, so I can keep my throat from going dry.”

“I will think about it, but I certainly cannot give you any container that could produce sharp fragments. I hope you do not mind if it is a water bottle.”

“Is there any meaning behind the name Sagittarius?”

“If there was, I would hardly let you know what it was. I sometimes take on names of birthstones and flowers as well.”

“Why do you want to know about the term Underclaw 52?”

“I would like to know just how much value there is in it. So what is Underclaw 52?”

“I wish I knew. Then I could go home.”

If Sagittarius failed, Scorpio would likely take over.

I would be unable to stop it.

Scorpio’s specialty was torture using drugs.

He might be able to get the information, but Shiromae Ayumi’s body would not last. There was a good possibility of her dying before he got the information out of her. If possible, it would be best if Sagittarius got all the information on Underclaw 52.

We only had a few days. Even I did not know the exact number.

“Why do you think a simple high school girl would know this amazing secret?”

“Is Underclaw 52 amazing? Is it a secret? Tell me everything you know.”

“If you know so little, how would you be able to know if I was telling the truth? What if I told you Underclaw 52 was a delicious neighborhood bakery?”

“Aquarius is in charge of determining the veracity of the information, not me. So are you saying Underclaw 52 is a delicious neighborhood bakery?”

“This is a strange feeling.”

“What is?”

“I cannot tell what you are after. It almost seems like you are simply trying to kill time with me in here.”

“I want to get to know you better.”

“For your job?”

“There is one thing I am curious about.”

“(...Why are leaning in toward my ear like this?)”

“(...Because I do not want the people monitoring this to hear.)”

“(...I see. So you want to trick me into thinking you are on my side.)”

“(...Do you even know what this Underclaw 52 is?)”

When Sagittarius left the room, he had arrived at an answer.

He entered a different room that monitored the first room with high resolution cameras to determine the movements of facial muscles, levels of perspiration, and other such things. Once inside, he unhesitatingly pulled his handgun on his colleague.

“...What are you doing?”

“Shiromae Ayumi knows about Underclaw 52.”

“And it is your job to get information on it out of her.”

“Yes, and I would like to eliminate anyone who gets in my way. Your goal is not to learn about Underclaw 52. You want to intentionally make me fail so you can put Scorpio in charge, don’t you? That way, Scorpio’s harsh torture will permanently seal Shiromae Ayumi’s mouth.”

“You fell for it?”

“For what?”

“The suspension bridge effect, Stockholm syndrome, and Lima syndrome you use create temporary illusions of a bond between perpetrator and victim. That is not a one way street. I am saying that you-”

“Using words as weapons is my job.”

“You have fallen for it. You fell for Shiromae Ayumi’s trick!! It is not too late. Put down that gun. The person asking the questions in the conversation was reversed at some point. That is proof that you were falling into Shiromae Ayumi’s trap!!”

“If you are telling the truth, then I should be able to find the truth by getting

you to speak.”

Now.

Who lies on the side of truth?

File 04: Ninja Art – Sleep Diver Technique ©

In the end, it was a war of technology.

“K-Kunoichi-chan? I don’t think you can fly through the sky just with your arms and legs tied to a giant kite.”

“Don’t worry. It’ll be okay, old man! Look at this Iga Ninja Art – Free Flight...dbrblcher!?”

It was all given names like “ninja art” or “ninja technique”, but a ninja’s power really came from technology. That went for the shape and materials of a shuriken and the throwing form and training methods for the one throwing the shuriken.

It was made to look like a miracle or some secret art.

A ninja’s status was directly connected to his ability to reproduce such things with manmade tools.

“Dammit, it didn’t work...”

“If you can fall from a height like that and suffer nothing worse than some scratches and a panty shot, I’d say your safety techniques are what we should be adopting.”

“Old man, don’t you have some kind of interesting ninja art? The Kouga announced on the internet that they’ve implemented a cloning technique.”

“I’m willing to bet the information on their official site is full of exaggerations. That said, their metamaterial technology is quite something.”

I tried to get her to leave with that noncommittal response, but Kunoichi-chan stuck with me. She must have been starving for something exciting. There was nothing better for the health of my eyes than the way various parts of her were jiggling.

“I saw that! That’s the thing that bends laser weapons all over the place, right!? The upper level Kouga ninja really are flashy, aren’t they!?”

“I say techniques that show off like a bird in a singing competition go against the entire purpose of a ninja.”

“Old man, enough with these boring things like optimizing the shape of the shuriken. Can’t you make something with a little more oomph to it? Oomph!!”

“Well, I guess I do have something like that.”

“Really!?”

“It’s just a prototype though. Here it is! Ninja Art – Sleep Diver Technique!!”

“Throwing English into the name from the very beginning, I see!!”

What I pulled out of the storage shed was a piece of equipment that looked like a wetsuit used in scuba diving. The inside was covered in electrodes.

Kunoichi-chan sat on the ground cross-legged with a disappointed look in her eyes.

“That looks really boring.”

“Even if I told you it artificially created an out-of-body experience?”

“What!?”

“First, the amplitude of your brain waves is brought to a certain value using your body’s natural electricity. Then a large wave is forced in from outside. When that wave slams into them, your brain waves lose their place and end up leaving your body.”

“Oh, oh! A-and!? Old man, what happens in this out-of-body experience!? Can you cause supernatural phenomena that exceed the limits of your physical body!? Do you make a ‘dorororon’ sound effect!?”

“No, it isn’t anything as exciting as that.”

“...Oh, then we’re back to boring. Can it actually even cause an out-of-body experience?”

“By the way, Kunoichi-chan, did the bath seem a bit chilly last night?”

“It’s the middle of summer. Of course not.”

“Then my experiment was a success.”

“Old man!! Did you use your research money to create a tool for peeking!?”

“But performing intelligence work without being noticed is part of being a ninja...bchgrgalgal!?”

It was then that an email arrived at both my and Kunoichi-chan’s smart phones simultaneously. Everyone in the village had likely received one. It was an emergency email reporting an intruder. We did not simply have a siren go off because that would notify the intruder that they had been caught.

“They’re here, old man! It’s the Kouga!!”

“But I thought the village was surrounded by multiple light wave sensors?”

“It’s that clone technique that’s gotten popular lately. The metamaterial at the base can bend laser weapons, so they can probably get past the sensors!”

As Kunoichi-chan charged toward where the intruder was detected, she seemed in an oddly good mood. There was no real reason for me to go as well, but Kunoichi-chan would likely hit me later if I slacked off.

We ran into a Kouga ninja girl in a thick part of the forest around the perimeter of the village. I will refer to her as “ninja girl” so as not to confuse her with Kunoichi-chan.

“Wh-what!? It looks like some girl with huge breasts is naked other than a translucent raincoat!! Is this a secret Kouga weapon!? M-my blood pressuuuuuurrreeeeee!!”

I grabbed my nose and leaned up against a nearby tree and the ninja girl shouted at me with her face beat red.

“This isn’t some Ninja Art – Blood Pressure Raising Technique!! The sunburning effect of artificial ultraviolet rays burned the metamaterial refracting surface!! Waahhnn!!”

“...C-come to think of it, those things that bent laser weapons were one-time-use kinds of things.”

“Old man, I remote hacked into her tablet and checked her secret scrolls. This bitch was trying to destroy the Ninja Art – Sleep Diver Technique!!”

“We are trying to develop the same technique in the Kouga village, but this Iga old man’s development speed was just too fast. At the press release during the last Ninja Technique Weapons Show, the Kouga developers were blown away.”

Well, the point of those weapons shows was to hold business negotiations and to apply pressure to the enemy. After that thought, I realized something.

“Mh!? Come to think of it, the Kouga were using that shuriken I developed!!”

“...Oh, I remember that. That was the one with the changeable rough skin meant to alter air resistance. The technology was so specialized that it would be immediately identified as an Iga shuriken if it was left at a scene, so the higher level ninja who specialize in assassination were complaining.”

“Uuh!?”

I had heard that the ninja would purposefully scrape away the surface of the shuriken with a file, but hearing it said to my face did make me sad.

Meanwhile, the raincoat-wearing huge-breasted ninja thrust her chest out in pride (causing me more problems!!).

“Heh heh heh. The Ninja Patent Office uses a first-to-file system!! I do recall that the Iga rough skin shuriken was applied to the Ninja Patent Office. However, during the inspection, the Kouga developed their own, applied it, and it cleared the inspection!! In other words, ours is the official one!!”

“Wait a second. That doesn’t add up. Oh, right. If I recall, when I applied for a patent, a virus scare in the Ninja Patent Office servers and a small fire in the document storage area caused the process to be delayed...”

“Nyan nyan☆”

“H-how could you!?”

“What are you saying!? You Iga anticipated a portion of our development of mizugumo and submitted for a patent on a necessary part of the research ahead of us! We were forced to spend 5 years finding a way around that!!”

“...Old man?”

“Gwah ha ha! Being a modern ninja means being an expert in information warfare!!”

“And that is why we must destroy your Ninja Art – Sleep Diver Technique before you can get a © added to the end!!”

“I see, I see. And while we can do nothing but watch on, you Kouga will complete your research and submit it to the Ninja Patent Office? It’s already too late!! That will no longer work!!”

“Nonsense. We have already checked. The Ninja Art – Sleep Diver Technique has yet to be submitted to the Ninja Patent Office!!”

“Not to the Japanese Ninja Patent Office, no. But what about the Bahamian Central Ninja Patent Administration!?”

“Hahh...!?”

“Their inspection time is much shorter than the Japanese Ninja Patent Office, so I thought it would be easier to just use a foreign agency and system.”

“Wha-...? You-...! You can’t do that!! The ninja is a part of Japanese culture!! It’s Cool Japan!! What are we supposed to do in the Kouga if you start bringing the Bahamas into this!?”

“If you’re gonna complain, I suggest you take it up with the Bahamian courts. Bahamian lawyers will represent us and argue over the Bahamian laws in the Bahamian language. And you will have to pay for the trip to the other side of the world.”

“Waaahhn!! I’ve never left the Chubu region, so I don’t think I could handle that!!”

The nude raincoat girl (with huge breasts) ran off somewhere at full speed while crying like a child. By the way, the Kouga village was in the Kinki region.

Kunoichi-chan had been completely taken aback by the entire thing, but she finally regained her ability to function.

“...Old man, it was immature of you to make a girl cry.”

“Huh? It seems to me, you let her escape!”

“Argh!!” Kunoichi-chan clicked her tongue and began pursuit. “I’m betting her getting caught by the sensors on the way into the Iga village was a bluff! By giving us a sense of security by the fact that she did not actually make it in, we might be a little more lenient in our pursuit!!”

“But the Ninja Art – Sleep Diver Technique was not damaged.”

“How do you know that is what the Kouga are after? We only saw the secret scrolls in the Kouga ninja girl’s tablet!! All of that could have been planted for us to find!!”

I realized she was right.

But something still didn’t add up.

“If she could get in just fine, couldn’t she have slipped out unnoticed just as easily?”

“She can’t get rid of footprints and smell, old man. If we realized she did something to the Iga ninja techniques we are developing or had even stolen our technological information, we would have used dogs and everything else at our disposal to pursue her. But if she makes us think we stopped her before she could do anything, we will not be as tenacious in our pursuit. Despite it being the exact same job, we would be more careless and less persistent.”

“...So that disappointed aura of hers was all an act?”

“Old man, you secretly found her moe, didn’t you? We are professionals at this kind of thing, so be on your guard. At any rate, we need to take care of this Kouga ninja. That is how we ensure the safety of our business from the background.”

“No, wait!!”

“Wh-what is it, old man?”

“This is the kind of elite ninja girl that was sent to the front lines. If we managed to acquire the ninja tools she has, we might be able to learn something about Kouga technology. Even if we could not use it, we could at least gain a better understanding of the direction their technology will develop

in the future. Then we could put together some interception ninja techniques ‘ahead of time’ to oppose those things.”

New technology opened up brand new territory. If that new territory was something no one had anticipated, the old methods of defense would no longer work. As such, massive amounts of research money were spent on finding paths to that unknown territory in order to take all the advantages found within for oneself.

But if we circled ahead and sealed off that path and set up mountains of swords in that new territory, the Kouga would be unable to get back the money they had spent reaching it. They would be left with nothing but massive amounts of debt. That kind of monetary damage was a wonderful way of waging war, don’t you think?

“...Old man, you’re a ninja too, right?”

“Well, I’m certainly not a samurai that fights fair and square.”

“Then don’t you think it makes no security sense for a high class ninja to be carrying technology they don’t want others to have when heading to the enemy’s village?”

“That is why the Iga and the Kouga have this kind of cultural exchange. And that is also why I am creating wonderful ninja techniques like the Ninja Art – Sleep Diver that allows you – well, it’s not even you really – to head to the front lines without worrying about that.”

“Okay, fine. I don’t want her to have the last laugh. If she doesn’t pay the penalty, this will have been a waste.”

“Also, I need to ask that nude, raincoat-wearing, and huge-breasted girl some things about her body! That’s the dream of men!! In fact, it would be a waste to eliminate her! It wouldn’t be ecological!!”

“Ah!! My motivation gauge just dropped down to zero!!”

File 05: Watch Out for New Types of Scams

“Is she moe?”

“No! She is a bitch, not moe!!”

“Uh...A waifu is the same thing as a wife, right?”

“No! No!! Oh my god!! Waifus are not the same as your fucking old wife! They’re basically all virgins and pure ladies!!”

The blond white guy and black guy with an afro at the next table were hotly debating what was likely some kind of global environmental issue, but I had no time to listen to them.

“When you failed to advance two years in a row, I started to think you might be an idiot, but I never expected for an underclassman (ha!) like me to surpass you.”

“Shut up!! So what if I’m an idiot!? Why did I have to choose a major with no set answers like philosophy!?”

I had been stuck in my freshman year for more consecutive years than I cared to count, so a neighborhood little sister-type (even though she was over 20 years old!!) had brought me to a bar in order to console me. ...The girl who should have been (but wasn’t) my underclassman was treating me and that just made the whole thing tear at my pride!

“...Heh. Heh heh heh. Even if I’m losing in terms of school year and credits, I am still your senior when it comes to life. I have abundant experiences.”

“True. I don’t think there are many people who have experienced living within an infinite loop. I await your valuable advice.”

“It isn’t infinite!! I’m not caught at the receiving end of some endless midair combo attack!! I will escape this hell. I’ll start by heading to the philosophy

professor's office and bowing down to him!!"

I repeatedly slammed my fist against the table, but quickly softened my blows because the contents of my beer mug were about to spill out.

"By the way, what exactly do you gain from having abundant experiences?"

"You get better at sex."

She glared at me.

"...You have abundant experience with that?"

"Sorry. I'm really sorry. I don't have the experience needed to withstand a girl's scornful look like that. I wouldn't be able to stand being called disgusting by a schoolgirl."

I was like a salted slug.

But I couldn't stand it.

I didn't want to be looked down on anymore! I wanted to outdo her in at least one thing, whatever it might be!

"I know!! With abundant experiences, you don't fall for scams! I heard that on TV once!!"

"If that was true, I don't think the elderly would be the primary victims of phone scams..."

"You just don't understand, little miss underclassman!!"

"Don't get full of yourself. I am above you when it comes to school year and grades. I was thinking of helping you with your next report, but now I don't think so."

The world's most ugly expression appeared on my face.

"...Eh...eh heh heh. Do you know about the roadside smoking scam, my wonderful upperclassman?"

"What's that?"

She was the little sister type (even though she was over...etc.), but she was a college student who had passed the 20 year barrier, so she was trying out

drinking and smoking “for now”. After 2 or 3 years, she would likely awaken to being a no-smoking warrior.

“They have enacted rules banning smoking on the streets here and there, right?”

“Yes, I’ve seen the signs. There’s a fine, right?”

“Yes, but who collects the fine? A police officer? Or is it entrusted to a civilian like with illegal parking?”

As usual, she tilted her head in puzzlement at my question.

“Huh? Now that you mention it...”

“That aspect isn’t well known. So you can scam people by approaching someone smoking in one of those roadside no smoking areas and demanding they pay the fine of a few thousand yen. They might realize it was a scam later, but the loss wasn’t that much and they were technically breaking the rule in the first place. For those reasons, the odds are low they will try to find you again.

She threw an edamame into her mouth and sprinkled some salt onto the platter with a sour look.

“It makes sense... But that’s only a few thousand yen.”

“The first time, yes. But if you do it again and again, you can make quite a bit. Assuming you don’t try it on some gangsters or some other kind of landmine, you can make a fair amount of money. Unlike phone scams, you don’t even really need to be a smooth talker. All you have to do is not look particularly suspicious.”

“I’ve never heard of that. Well, I don’t smoke outside anyway, so it has nothing to do with me. I’ll store that away in a corner of my mind, though. Thanks.”

“Fw-fwoooooohhhhh!! That’s the first time someone has thanked me in half a year!!”

“...Surely the clerks at convenience stores at least give a slight bow.”

“The worker at the convenience store I go to always clicks her tongue when I walk in.”

“That’s quite the aura you have!!”

After that, we discussed the problem I had of having to yet again introduce myself and show off a hidden talent at the new student party without letting anyone know how many years I had been a freshman, the more serious problem of what would happen to me in the more specialized third and fourth years when the basic first and second years were causing me so much trouble, and the most serious problem of all of how many times you were allowed to repeat a year. Afterwards, I was feeling quite down, but then the little sister type (even though she...etc.) changed the subject.

“By the way.”

“What is it, little miss underclassman?”

“...”

“...My wonderful upperclassman?”

“Where did you learn about that roadside smoking scam? Did you hear about it online? Don’t tell me you fell for it yourself.”

“An excellent question!!” I sat straight up from the table I had fallen slumped over. “A kind person I met on a message board created an anti-scam manual! It’s the ultimate survival book that collects all the many traps that are running rampant in modern Japan and it only costs 1000 yen. Only 1000 yen!! With just the one book, you can protect yourself from all sorts of crimes. That was one great purchase I made!!”

“...Um. If you recall, I had never heard of this roadside smoking scam.”

“Yes, and?”

“Does that scam even exist? Are you sure that book isn’t a scam filled with completely made up information?”

File 06: 385D

I was led here by a number I was cursed with.

“...I don’t quite understand what you are trying to say.”

“I don’t entirely understand what has happened to me either.”

I was in a small non-chain café a bit away from the station. I was speaking with the woman who was the only other customer.

Yes.

I did not know what it meant, but I knew it had some meaning. It had always been the same. This was yet another checkpoint in a chain of events.

“385D. That number has been around me for a long time now. The very first time, I received a piece of junk mail with that number on it. When I searched the block at column 38 and row 5D on the map, I found a plastic plate. When I left my things with the hotel cloak room, I was #385. The D came from the word ‘deposit’. That indicated my things were to be treated as more valuable than normal luggage.”

After that, 385D was constantly following me around. When I found a time bomb and had no idea what to do, I randomly entered 385D and the timer stopped. I had once used a laser at an angle of incidence of 38.5 degrees for a data transmission. The D referred to the wavelength of the light used in the transmission. It stood for “deep blue”.

“So while you were chasing after 385D or being chased by 385D, you made your way to this café?”

“You don’t believe me. Well, look at this table’s production number,” I said as I pointed at the small sticker on the side of the table.

I did not need to speak it out loud.

“It says 3-85-D.”

“That’s 385D. That number is everywhere.”

I had hesitated over whether I should sit across from her, but the café’s owner had glared at me suspiciously while I remained awkwardly standing. I quickly sat down due to the pressure of his gaze. The woman did not seem to particularly mind that I sat across from her.

“Tell me. What do you have? From everything that has happened to me so far, I must assume that you have something related to the full picture of 385D. It might just be a small piece. I want you to tell me what that is. What am I to do next?”

“Why do you think I have something like that?”

“I met you while following 385D.”

“What if I told you I didn’t know anything about it?” she said smoothly.

Her voice gave me a feeling that she would act the same even while viewing the end of the world.

“Then I would give up here. But I doubt it will come to that. I’ve managed to come this far. Whether I want it to or not, 385D always gives me the answer. I could probably make it through a university entrance exam or the lock on the entrance of the White House using 385D. That is how my life has worked ever since that day.”

The look in the woman’s eyes changed ever so slightly.

She sipped at a coffee I did not know the name of and said, “I see. This is very interesting, but how did you get to the address of this café? Its address is quite different from 385D.”

“That was a tricky one. I started with 385 and D. If you want to use D as a number, you must switch over to base 16. That also means you cannot think of 385 directly as 385. If you convert the base 16 number 385D into base 10...”

The woman’s expression did not change as I gave my rapid explanation. She had said it was interesting, but she did not look particularly interested. Well, whatever. I explained the process of adding, subtracting, multiplying, and

dividing.

“...And after all that 385D is transformed into 12-9-41 which just so happens to point to this café’s address. And the sole customer in the café was you, sitting at a table with the production number 3-85-D.”

“I see. It does indeed seem you have gotten wrapped up in something quite strange. But it seems to me that initial junk mail might have had some ill intentions behind it.”

“So what is the next 385D you have for me? Do you know?”

“I called this strange, but I never said it was 385D I found strange. In fact, 385D itself is meaningless.”

“...?”

I fell silent and the woman continued.

“Let me check something first. You have been followed around by the exact number 385D this entire time, right? It hasn’t been some different number. It has been 385D the entire time. And the consistency of the coincidences is what you find so odd, right?”

“Yes. That’s what I’ve been explaining to you this entire time! 385D is everywhere around me!!”

“But 385D, 3.85D, and 38-5-D all seem like completely different numbers to me.”

“What...?”

“They are, aren’t they? When working, do you see a monthly wage of 55,000 yen and a monthly wage of 5,500 yen to be exactly the same? And setting 385 aside, what even is D? The number loses all meaning as soon as you throw a letter of the alphabet in there. If you insist on it being a base 16 number like before, it could work, but it hasn’t been consistently base 16, now has it?” The woman raised her index finger. “What clinched it was this café’s address. You forced a number that clearly had nothing to do with 385D into fitting the pattern. You redid the calculations as many times as it took to make it fit. That is the truth behind this. You are not being followed around by 385D. Someone

has led you to connect every number you see to 385D.”

“Led me...? So 385D was never really there...?” I said blankly.

With her index finger still raised, the woman said, “What I was calling strange was that ‘something’ has trapped you in a mindset where you are obsessed with 385D. I do not know what the person who did this is after or how they did it, but if they can make 385D fit completely different things, it could be used for a cult or something. They could claim that everything in the world is related to ‘something’ and all your problems can be solved by relying on that ‘something’. You might have gotten caught in some experiment being run by some dangerous people.”

“Wait, this is way more than just being followed around by a number. What is this? What is happening to me? What have I gotten involved in!?”

“Listen.” The woman stood up with a light smile on her face. “I was just killing time after having finished a ‘job’. I suppose I can solve this 385D puzzle of yours to help kill some more time.”

“What do you mean by ‘job’? Oh, right. Who exactly are you?”

“It may be due to 385D’s influence that you got so far into this conversation without asking that.” The woman paused for a moment. “Let’s just say the ‘jobs’ that seem to follow me around have much deeper meaning than some number.”

File 07: A Comfortable Casket for You

We lived in a world where the influential science magazine Planet had recognized the existence of everything from fairies and werewolves to zombies and bigfoot. I would be lying if I said that did not come with its advantages.

For example, a casket maker could find customers other than the dead.

Those types tended to come by in the dead of night, so the only real change I had to make was an alteration my hours of operation.

“The outside has to be ebony. I am sure I do not need to tell you, but there can be no cracks.”

A blonde girl of about 10 sat on the table.

However, she was about a tenth the size of a human.

The fairy seemed to realize this was bad manners, but she was simply too small to see the blueprint I had laid on the table if she was sitting in the rusted folding chair. Also, my office was rather cluttered and she did not want to get anywhere near the electric fan or my pet cat.

By the way, I had some doubts about the age she had given.

“Make it completely out of wood that fits together perfectly. No metal nails are to be used. And glue is out of the question.”

“Fine, fine. So you want it done using something like parquetry.”

“Yes, yes. Parquetry.”

No casket had been made yet. The customer and I were staring at the blueprints to make sure there were no imperfections in the order and discussing it to make sure there was no discrepancy in what we thought the finished product would be.

...But making a casket for someone of her size felt more like making a bento

box. I had heard that making one of the nice multi-tiered ones could be quite difficult, though.

“Cover the inside with the low-resistance material I ordered from elsewhere.”

The girl crawled on all fours across the blueprint so she could tap at a point for emphasis.

“Sigh. You said you wanted a casket to use as a bed, so I thought you would want to fill it with roses or something,” I commented.

She glared at me.

Given her size, it did not have much impact.

“How am I supposed to sleep with those thorny things everywhere? A garlic-hater in my neighborhood was bragging about a bed from here, so I wanted to try it out. Why would I want scratches all over my body?”

“From your neighborhood? So are you an overseas student from Romania?”

“...Oh, and don’t forget to cover every inch of the low-resistance material with silk velvet. I am allergic to petrochemical products. I would rather not end up in the sick house after spending so much.”

“Umm, are you not going to put a giant cross on the front or anything?”

She glared at me more.

“Do you have something against me?”

“No, it’s just that roses and crosses add to the gothic image. Your clothes are fairly lacy, so I thought...”

“You are mixing together things I like and things I hate. Are you mocking me?”

“...You also want audio equipment, right?”

“People spend half of every day and therefore half of their life in their dreams, so it is only natural to prepare the proper environment for it. You have measured me. I would like speakers set up right next to where my ears will be on the right and left. Make the outside of the speakers out of ebony and the diaphragm out of paper. The inside components do not matter as much, but do not forget to make anything that will touch my skin out of natural materials.”

The girl rolled over onto her back on top of the blueprint and placed her palms over either side of her head.

“I guess I will need to fill the walls with cotton to soundproof it.”

“No, that would make it too hot.”

“I could add a small air conditioner...no, that that would show up too much. How about I add some coolant? You know, like the kind you put on your forehead when you have a cold...”

“I am allergic.”

“...Then, what about a cool mist sprayer. But with the audio equipment too, that might use too much electricity. It would be hard to power that for 12 hours straight with a laptop battery.”

“I will not have a power cable coming from my casket. And it cannot have a car battery on it either. That lacks elegance. There is something wrong when the power source is bigger than the casket itself.”

The girl stood back up as she did nothing but complain.

I chose to interpret her complaints as meaning she trusted me enough to resolve them.

“Umm, should I add solar panels then?”

“...You want me to leave my casket under the sun? I think you do have something against me. What kind of idiot would put their bed outside?”

“Yes, you probably would get attacked by crows.”

“I will view any further insults as disrespect.”

A pale light came from the girl’s palm, but I was not entirely sure what kind of effects it would have.

“I guess I’ll have to set up a wireless power transmission system. You’re fine with electromagnetic waves, right?”

“It is beginning to sound like this casket would function even on Mars,” said the girl as she eliminated the light.

“What do you want for security?”

“That is a nonissue as I can simply lock the door to my mansion. More importantly, I would like to speak about this here. You say there will be wheels on the bottom of the casket.”

“They’re convenient when you need to clean or want to rearrange things, don’t you think?”

For a human like me, a bento box-size casket seemed like nothing, but it would be difficult to move for someone who was only 15 cm tall. ...That was my thinking anyway.

“If we are talking about security, that worries me more than anything else. Someone could use those wheels to take the casket somewhere while I am sleeping in it.”

“I thought security was a nonissue because you could lock the door to your mansion?”

“If any unease of that sort remains, I will not be able to sleep comfortably.”

“Well, it’s my job to make the casket to the customer’s order, so I’ll do as you say.”

Since it was the size of a bento box, I didn’t really see what the presence or lack of wheels would matter to a “large intruder”.

Perhaps she was planning to hold it in place with magnets.

“One last thing, but it is probably my most difficult request. I need some kind of ventilation. However, it cannot allow in any outside light. That too would get in the way of sleeping comfortably.”

“Look here. I can handle that. You know the U-shaped pipes used in plumbing? By bending a pipe back and forth again and again like that, the light can be kept out, so don’t worry.”

“Then please do that.”

Hmm.

But given the size, it would be difficult to build from scratch. I decided it might be faster to use some everyday items as jumping off points. For example, I could make the speakers by disassembling a small pair of headphones and

replacing the external portion with parts made of natural materials.

Also, I would need to add a fan to the ventilation pipe, so an extremely small motor would be necessary. If only I could find something convenient to use for that...

“At any rate, do everything you can to ensure I, Titania, can have peaceful sleep. Bear in mind that doing so is directly connected to the stability of your fragile human society.”

“That makes you sound like some kind of evil demon king.”

“Unfortunately for you, I do not just sound like one,” said the girl as she put her hands on her hips in a triumphant pose.

Eight days had passed since I had overcome all of the unreasonable requests of that selfish rich girl and had completed her made-to-order casket.

I used my successful works in my advertisements, so I was editing some photos I had taken for a catalog. As I was doing that, a familiar face came up to the counter.

“How dare you sell me something defective!?”

“Ma’am, that is the cat door. The entrance for customers is over there...”

“I could not manage to open it, so I had no choice! Also, if cat siths are allowed to use it, why can’t I? But more importantly, it was defective!!”

The girl must have felt humiliated because her face of beet red as she yelled at me.

Leaving that aside, I had no idea what about it could have been defective.

“It is past the cooling-off period,” I warned her.

“Are you talking about the money? I don’t care about those scraps of paper!”

“I’m jealous.”

“...You told me not to worry about the ventilation.”

“I’m pretty sure it was constructed so no light could get in.”

“That is not the issue. You added a fan to the ventilation pipe, didn’t you?”

“If I hadn’t, fresh air couldn’t have gotten in.”

“But why did you have to use the same kind of motor used in the device that drills into people’s teeth at the dentist!? It sends a chill down my spine so I cannot sleep!!”

File 08: The Clogging Time Lodes

“Hurry up. You really need to pay your video rental late fees. The longer it takes you, the more you’re strangling yourself, so just hurry up and pay up.”

The part-time worker girl speaking to me over the phone was looking down on me. I was dealing with the last finishing touches before putting the script together, so I could not have any distractions. In this age where a home computer could intercept a cruise missile (assuming the household could somehow get their hands on a radar and surface-to-air missile to connect to said computer), it may have seemed silly for me to be writing out calculations on paper, but super computer simulations took a really long time once they began. For that reason, I wanted to make sure I had all the calculations perfect before actually running the machine.

However, the video rental late fee was completely my fault, so I couldn’t really complain. And I had been stuck at a complete standstill on those finishing touches for two weeks now, anyway.

“...I see. So the charges have been piling up ever since the disk return date.”

“Don’t vaguely think back on it all. Just pay up already. You’re an engineer that deals with time lodes, right? Then you must be loaded. If you weren’t, you wouldn’t insist on these high quality disks during the age of download rentals.”

The data on the disks was nothing but a collection of digital signals, so it could be sent over the internet easily enough. However, when the amount of data was too great, the internet lines would be overloaded if a large number of people used them at once. For this reason, the movie market had been divided into the internet version that was low quality but could be obtained immediately and the high quality disk version that had incredibly high resolution but took time to obtain.

However, I had rented a reprint of an old horror movie, so the master data

itself was full of noise.

“I just feel more comfortable with physical media. I am an old-fashioned sort of person.”

“Even though you deal with time lodes which couldn’t be more digital?”

“Time lodes, yes.”

A time machine had been created surprisingly easily.

It had all started with the discovery of a certain phenomenon during an investigation of the relationship between solar winds and auroras. Just as Einstein would have been feeling relieved due to neutrinos, this phenomenon would have left him perplexed once more. It was a natural phenomenon that was related to the identity of the UFOs that people claimed to see from time to time.

However, the time machine was in the form of thick gloves covered in cables. They allowed you to grab and move objects in the “other era”. The gloves were nothing more than an interface. In reality, a set wavelength amplitude was used to apply pressure to the coordinates of the target. In the “other era” it was likely mistaken for a poltergeist or something similar.

That left the question of how to use it.

Currently, an international treaty only allowed history to be changed “for the equal good of all people” and care had to be taken not to put too much stress on history.

This meant that it could not be used to avoid a large war in history or to evacuate people before a great disaster.

However, there were reasons other than the treaty that these things could not be done.

“The breadth of what we can do is limited. It isn’t easy. Since we can only interfere so as not to put too much time stress on history, the ‘time’ we can target is limited to small spots. That is why they are referred to as ‘lodes’.”

I spun my pen around as I spoke and I could hear the tempo of the voice on the other side of the phone dropping. It was the same as most students

listening to a lecture in school.

“Hmm... I get paid the same either way, so I guess I can slack off and chat,” said the girl. “A time someone has already interfered with cannot be interfered with by someone else, right? They say that is causing the spots to grow smaller and smaller.”

“Yes, but we still cannot abandon the time lodes. After all, the amount of resources available here in the future is overwhelmingly low. If we do not interfere with the past to lower the rate at which resources are used, human culture will dry up before too long.”

I jotted down a few formulas, drew two lines through them, repeated the process, balled up the paper, and tossed it to my trashcan. My aim was dead on, but it struck a mountain of similar papers sticking up from the trashcan. The mountain collapsed and fell to the floor.

“The amount that is historically saved comes to us like a vein of gold suddenly appearing, right?”

That was correct.

However, time lodes were not a magical technology that could produce resources and fortunes indefinitely.

The general public spoke of it as if it was, but that was nothing more than information manipulation carried out to ensure fear of resources drying up did not spread through society.

Third-rate tabloids and internet message boards usually did not have anything important to say, but they were occasionally right on the mark.

“You were wondering before why I couldn’t pay my late fee if I deal with time lodes, right?”

“Technically, I should still be talking about that.”

“The number of spots is growing more and more limited. To be honest, I’m having trouble putting together a script.”

“Eh? Is the world really in that serious a bind? There’s practically an inexhaustible supply of time that has passed, right? There should be plenty of

spots...”

“Well, that is technically true. However, there is a more fundamental issue. Time lodes have to do with fine-tuning history. You trim the fat and save as many resources as possible so they can be used by us in the future. However, once human history has truly been optimized, we will be unable to save any more.”

“Is that close to happening? That sounds bad.”

“It’s still a ways off.”

But it would still be coming much sooner than that part-time worker girl was thinking.

“But if it comes to it, can’t you just ignore the spots? After all, we can’t just dig up resources like normal. If we don’t dig them up from the past, humanity is finished. So in the end, won’t we be forced to get past all this posturing about changing history? We just have to start making major changes to history to find some new time lode spots, right?”

“You say that like the changes would have no effect on you.”

Also, it was impossible.

In fact, there had been some idiots who had tried to challenge history.

“Soon after the first time machine was completed, everyone was eager to try to make themselves into gods or kings. There was research into making a time weapon that would utterly wipe an enemy nation, a religion, or a culture from history. However, every single one of those attempts ended in failure.”

The reason for this was unknown.

I mentioned before that the time machine was a pair of special gloves that allowed you to move objects similar to a poltergeist.

However, there were objects that could be moved and those that could not.

In fact, your hand would go straight through most objects even when you tried to move them forcefully. There was no correlation with the mass or makeup of the objects. There had been reports of only being able to move one of two identical coffee cups sitting right next to each other. This was a problem

troubling scientists across the globe.

Humans could not twist human history any more than absolutely necessary.

It was referred to as the Rebound Arrow problem. As a Nobel Prize was almost guaranteed for anyone who could solve it, quite a bit of research went into it.

That was why engineers like myself had changed the focus of our research to trying to gain wealth through the slight gaps that were open.

“And there is one other issue.”

I was hoping some inspiration might well up within me as I spoke, but I was probably fighting a losing battle once I started having to rely on things like that.

“The time lode spots are already so limited, but there is one other factor preventing us from mining.”

“Eh? What is it?”

“We can tell when history has changed. When we mess with history via time lodes, we see it as veins of gold suddenly appearing in this era. We do not fall into a situation where we do not even realize the veins of gold were not there before.”

“But that’s obvious. We have those safety locks to prevent getting trapped in the historical changes. Some scientist won the Nobel Prize for it a few decades back, right?”

“Originally, it was in the form of something like a polygraph. Minute changes in the magnetic field were captured and drawn out in a curve. Next, those were turned into writing. Then it was automatically inputted into electronic storage devices so it could be easily searched. And in the modern day, we finally have it left in people’s heads in the straight informational state we call ‘memories’. We no longer have to go back through the data from a state of having forgotten everything.”

“That all sounds great. It sounds like a victory for humanity.”

“Yes, if you are trying to oppose time. However, we are trying to use changes in time to create resources to keep our dried up society running for just a little

longer.”

I sighed.

I had quit smoking, but I could sense something toxic in my breath.

“To be honest, we are starting to be unable to bend time to our will. The amount of objects and information that are unaffected by alterations to history has passed a certain level. If that amount continues to grow, history will not change even when we apply stimuli to the time lode spots. It’s like rebar. We have put thick rebar inside a thick rubber plate we need to be able to bend with our bare hands. And we keep adding more and more.”

The number of time lode spots decreasing was bad enough.

But now history had begun to harden and our stimuli were beginning to not work even on the remaining spots.

“If we cannot bend time to our will, does that mean we can no longer use time lodes to increase our resources?”

“Yes. An approaching age of war over the few remaining resources has been whispered of for ages.”

We really were stuck.

Present and future resources had completely dried up in our society and now we were even burning through the past resources.

“That sounds bad.”

“It is bad.”

“Then doesn’t someone have to alter history to interfere with the contractors and groups that wasted past time lodes?”

“You’re pretty bright. And that’s exactly what I’m working on now. This is no different from giving our future world resources by forcing an ecological mindset into the harmful factories that used tons of oil and poured black smoke into the air. However, the resource in question now is not oil or rare earth elements. It is time itself.”

“Then you need to work hard, Mr. Engineer.”

“And I am.”

“You still have to pay for that disk.”

“I’ll work on that, too.”

I gave a simple response, but I had a different thought in my heart.

...Can I actually manage this?

In order to conserve time, I had to manipulate those who manipulated time. The more I thought about it, the more it seemed horribly roundabout. It seemed like using power generated by a thermal power plant to turn the turbines of a hydroelectric power plant. If I wasn’t careful, I could actually cause a loss of energy leaving us with less time to use. In fact, doing this the normal way would result in exactly that. That was the exact reason I was so desperately trying to add these finishing touches to the script, but I could not see a way to pull it off. Engineers across the world were likely puzzling over the exact same formulas. If anyone had found a way, they would have already held a press conference with a triumphant look on their face.

And there was one other major issue.

It annoyed me, but there was really no helping the fact that I had racked up such a large late fee on my video rental.

After all, our calculations all pointed toward the time lodes reaching their limit in just another week. We had to find a solution in that time.

File 09: Even Matters of Hell are Decided with Cash?

Using the various functions of a modern smartphone, I brought a beautiful ghost girl out of a 3D ghost video and into the light of the sun (in response to a request to make her identity more visible, you could gain a lot of points by stripping away various things within a limited amount of time). As I was doing this, a high school girl called out to me from nearby.

However, the angle her voice came from was a bit odd.

Specifically, it came from diagonally up.

“Hey.”

“Wait, I think I just figured out the trick to Level 4. I see! If you remove that guy on the side of the group photograph, you can see the yukata-wearing ghost girl’s thigh!!”

“Hey!!” shouted someone who was floating.

Hmm. I had assumed she would panic a bit more, so I had downloaded an app to kill some time, but she had recovered surprisingly quickly.

Even I was impressed she had accepted that explanation so quickly.

“I get that I’m a ghost.”

She sat cross-legged while floating 180 degrees upside down. Because she was so high up, I could not see her panties at all. Come to think of it, sailor uniforms never seemed to die out. And yet PE uniforms and swimsuits went through model changes fairly easily.

“But where am I? Heaven? Hell? This seems like a Buddhist temple to me.”

That might have been because I was wearing a Buddhist monk’s outfit.

However, this was not a temple.

“This is a funeral hall. Or more accurately, a former one. It’s a commonplace institution that handles commonplace deaths for a commonplace city. Somewhere that met that condition was necessary.”

“For what?”

“For a privately-operated hell.”

I gave a simple response.

However, it may have been too simple. The girl’s eyebrows moved in puzzlement while she continued to float upside down.

“Basically, so many people are bad these days that hell is full. Before the system completely ground to a halt, the work had to be split up to lower the burden. This was accomplished using privately-operated hells that are cut off from the human world. ...Just think of it like a prison that has been outsourced to the private sector like they have in other countries.

The girl reacted nervously to the words “hell” and “prison”.

Good. That was exactly what I had expected.

“You’re saying my soul was meant to go to hell!? I never did anything bad!!”

“Buddhism is not a religion that endorses suicide. The whole idea of seppuku can often make people think it does, though. Also, you are a minor. Are you familiar with the Sai no Kawara? That is where children who died early and made their parents cry are beaten by oni.”

“...What am I supposed to do here?”

“I’ll explain about the punishments later, but for now just possess a yorishiro. Privately-operated hells may be cut off from the human world, but they are still a part of it. It would not be good for an exposed soul to stay here for long.”

“Yorishiro? Can you explain this using modern 21st century terms?”

“A Japanese doll has been prepared based on the information on your body from when you were alive. Just slip right into it.”

The girl shouted as if all the hair on her body had stood on end.

“No!! A Japanese doll combined with a beautiful ghost sounds like something out of a horror movie! I get the feeling my hair will grow really long!!”

“Don’t brazenly call yourself beautiful. But if you refuse to use the doll, your only other option is the Dutch wife in the closet...”

“Damn yooooooooouuuuuu, you worldly monk!! Aaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

Still screaming, the girl dove into the Japanese doll. She then seemed to successfully latch onto it. The Japanese doll did not move itself. Instead, the girl’s physical body regenerated around the doll. The Japanese doll functioned as the core of her physical body. She was now essentially a ghost you could touch.

Once the process was complete, she looked just like a life-sized girl wearing a sailor uniform.

That was why it didn’t particularly matter if she had chosen the Japanese doll or the Dutch wife.

“Okay!! I’m in!! What am I supposed to do in this privately-operated hell?”

“Just think of it like a homestay that runs on a point system. Just because it’s called a hell doesn’t mean you’re going to be dropped into a lake of blood.”

Looking puzzled, the girl asked, “What are these points?”

“Your punishment will come by email each day. There are a few different cards. With a combination of those, you must reach your quota of points for the day. If you work through the months and years you are sentenced here for, you will gain the right to be reborn. Then you will gain life once more as a baby in the human world.”

“I can’t go to heaven?”

“Going directly there from hell is a Buddha-level miracle. Don’t expect that from some random monk. If you want to go to heaven, live properly during your next life.”

“Hmm. Well, there are a lot of things I still want to try out, so being reincarnated is fine. Anyway, what kind of things do I have to do to meet this daily quota?”

I pointed to the screen of a laptop and the girl froze in place when she looked at it.

100 Spankings.

30 Points (of a 5000 point quota).

“To. Hell. With.

Thaaatttttttttttt!!”

“Ha ha ha. Are you forgetting that this *is* hell? Well, a privately-operated one. And I take the place of the evil oni that would torment you. You could say I am invincible when it comes to spirits. If you try to attack me physically, you will just hit an invisible wall which makes you flip over so I can see your panties.”

The girl frantically held down her skirt. Of course, the clothes were part of her spiritual body as well, so she didn’t really need to use her hands to do it.

“Dammit! Dammit!! Don’t underestimate a teenage girl!! We have hearts so sensitive we could very well die if we are confessing and a soccer ball flies in and ruins the mood!!”

The girl used the physical body she had finally obtained to punch at the tatami mats.

But...

“In that case, you’ll have to sit in the seiza-style and have heavy rocks placed on your legs.”

“Both options are too extreme!! Isn’t there something more on the level of standing out in the hallway while holding buckets full of water!?”

“...Unfortunately, if you do not meet your quota, a real oni from hell will come here. The penalty then would be something you could never even imagine. After all, they stab with swords and burn with flames with reckless abandon. Surely you’ve seen a folding screen painting of hell in a history textbook or something.”

“Uuh...!!”

“Well, it’s all about karma. That’s the basis for everything. I’d say you have things pretty good since you can choose the punishment for your sins. If you

understand, then stick out your ass.”

The girl glared at me and said, “Can I ask you one thing?”

“Decide for yourself. And that goes both for whether you can ask and how many things you can ask.”

“Why are you running something as horrible as a privately-operated hell?”

Was that really something to be curious about?

It seemed to me that there was only one possible answer.

“I have no real talents. I cannot cleanse the dead of their sins by setting up a barrier and shouting ‘Begone, evil spirits!’, so I have to earn my points in a more unorthodox method to get into heaven.”

“I thought you would naturally go to heaven if you lived a pure and just life? If you have to rely on a method like this, you must be some untrustworthy person who bears some great sin who is only dressed like priest! And I’ve been imprisoned by you! Wow, it sucks to be me!!”

“In Buddhism, you’re not allowed to eat meat or even fish. And all romance is forbidden. There’s such a fine line dividing heaven from hell that you end up way on the other side without even realizing it. Just living a normal life in modern society means you have small sins accumulating daily. It’s just that most people don’t even realize it.”

Hearing that, the girl had no choice but to fall silent.

From what I had seen in the data on her life, her favorite food had been giant burgers.

Also, she must have wanted to try out love. And teenage girls likely thought about such things in more vivid terms than my vague thoughts.

“Anyway, after working through a mild version of the tortures of hell, you get to head on to the reincarnation route. And I get to work through the debt I have built up. It’s win-win for us.”

“Kh. B-but...”

“Oh, don’t worry. Just touching your ass will not add to my sexual sins.”

“That just pisses me off further!!”

If we didn’t start moving on, we would never get anywhere.

The girl seemed to realize that as well. She slowly started to get down on all fours, but then...

“Ah!! Wait a second!!”

“What is it now?”

“You said I committed suicide, right? But I have no memory of that!!”

“Well, humans have a tendency to subconsciously alter their memories. Death is when you exceed the limits of biology. A memory of that would just destroy your personality.”

The girl’s expression made it clear she was not convinced.

She folded her arms and said, “So how and why did I die?”

“You jumped from a waterfall famous for suicides. The reason was something about love not turning out well. Do you know Yamada-kun from your class? The hot guy from the soccer team. You confessed to him and he rejected you.”

“Wait, wait. I may not remember the moment I died, but I remember my times at school. And I have no idea who this Yamada is!!”

“Ah?” I said in confusion.

The girl started shouting in desperation.

“I don’t know any Yamadas!! I don’t exchange email addresses with everyone in my class. Even if this Yamada really was in my class, I certainly couldn’t have fallen for him!!”

“...What is going on?”

My question only got more questions in return.

“Hey, wait a second. Did I really commit suicide? Where did you get this information on my motive? If it was from a suicide note, are you sure I wrote it? If you heard it from those around me, does it really have any more value than idle gossip?”

File 10: Destiny Takes the Form of an Arrow

Due to some aliens arriving from some other galaxy using a method of “moving while travelling back in time” that we earthlings could not even comprehend, the existence of destiny was proven. It had naturally been turned into various types of products and you could find the numbers of destiny lined up in a corner of news sites alongside the weather forecast.

Thanks to this, my unrequited love had fallen to pieces.

The main source of all this was the implants we had bought that used all this information to create arrows on the road in various colors.

Pink meant love comedy, black meant horror, red meant action, and blue meant suspense. Every time you approached an intersection, these arrows would appear. When you chose one, your life would naturally branch into a story of that genre. This was one benefit of destiny being proven.

Seems convenient, doesn't it?

But it wasn't.

For example, the upperclassman with a nice body that I had a thing for stood just a bit away from me.

“Hey, Kudou-kun. Sorry, but could you help me carry this? If you do, I'll treat you to something at a café after school.”

“I can't, senpai! The arrow pointing that way is a deep, deep black!! It's the black shine of extreme horror!!”

My upperclassman tilted her head in confusion and squeezed what she was carrying so as to squish the two large things behind it.

“...How odd. My arrow headed to you is the fluorescent pink of a love comedy.”

“That means something awaits that only benefits you! Nooo!!”

“But, Kudou-kun, the school is that way. Either way, you have to come toward me.”

“Is there something at school!?”

Yes.

When there was a specific place you wanted to go or a person you wanted to meet, these arrows could be dangerous. They did not only tell you good things. They were especially good at telling you about unavoidable tragedies!

On that note...

“Senpai, why are all the paths leading to you covered in pitch black lines? And not just today. It’s always like that.”

“My paths to you are mostly love comedy pink.”

“It turns other colors?”

“One day it was an embarrassingly strong love romance color...but for some reason, you ran away as quickly as you could yelling something about bizarre horror that day. I have never managed to arrive at the actual story.”

“...Are you talking about the day we happened to run into each other in the school infirmary?”

“Yes, the time when the health teacher was gone for some reason and all the beds were open. Also, my health had deteriorated after getting a cramp in my leg while swimming, so I was wearing my school swimsuit.”

“Nnnnnnn!!”

“Wait, Kudou-kun!! If you suddenly start slamming your head against that guardrail, this really will turn into horror!!”

I truly wanted to curse destiny. Does that mean I would have been able to do you-know-what with one of the most beautiful girls on the planet, but I ran away at full speed of my own volition!?

“But you know, Kudou-kun.”

“What, senpai?”

“I honestly think we would be better off without this ability the aliens gave us. Do you think so, too?”

I nodded vigorously.

After all, I wanted to do you-know-what! I didn't want any horror, though!!

“...So I was thinking about testing something out.”

“What's that?”

“Resisting the arrows of destiny,” said my upperclassman with a grin.

It was an attractive idea. And so it was the topic of a good bit of earth's modern fiction.

But...

“That idea is attractive enough to have landed a solid place in the entertainment world, but that is because of how unreasonably difficult it is, senpai. Humans enjoy stories that let them do vicariously what they cannot do themselves.”

“In my opinion, you are already under the arrows' control when you are convinced of that.” My upperclassman lightly waved her index finger with what she was carrying still in her arms. “Of course, destiny itself does not have a will that wishes to control us. It is just a phenomenon. When we head down the path of horror, we switch our minds over to a mindset of facing horror. Take watching a movie for example. If you go into the movie convinced that it will be terrible and so you decide ahead of time to search out all of the faults in the movie, you cannot even begin to watch the movie properly, right? It's the same as that. There could very well be love comedy situations down the path of a black arrow. However, our own minds refuse to pick up on it. That is why we end up thinking only horror can be found down the path of a black arrow. What do you think?”

“Now that you mention it...”

Whether the arrow indicated horror, love comedy, action, or suspense, surely the person seeing what lay down that path could interpret it how they pleased.

Like finding a small harmonious and heartwarming scene in a horror movie.

Like finding a short but memorable action scene in a suspense movie.

When I thought about it, what was with the pink and black arrows anyway?
On whose basis was the distinction between genres drawn?

Normally, happening across the upperclassman I had a thing for on the way to school and getting to walk with her to school would be more than enough to count as a love comedy for me. No, I could not even talk about it in that kind of framework. When I was with that upperclassman, something that did not fit into any genre appeared within my heart. It was my own personal color. A single color that no word could adequately express was most definitely there.

And yet...

Why did I have to call it pitch black horror?

What reason did I have to judge that this would be a terrible day?

“Are you prepared to overcome this?” asked my upperclassman.

She put her bag down on the ground and slowly reached her supple arm out towards me.

“I want to jump beyond these arrows and walk my own path. What about you?”

“...”

No words were needed.

I simply nodded, took my upperclassman’s hand, and started along that deep black arrow.

A smile appeared on my upperclassman’s face of a type I had never before seen there.

Our path was set.

We would now overcome destiny.

And just as the pitch black arrow predicted, a horribly bizarre type of horror that reeked of rusted iron began.

But it was fun.

When I was with that upperclassman, I felt like I would never die, no matter what happened!!

File 11: A Girl Arrived as Collateral on an Unrepaid Loan

A girl with splendid ringlet curls spoke while facing a tea table in my run-down 4.5 tatami mat apartment.

“Awful. This food is just so...so crude!! Ahh! I cannot believe you are forcing me to put this in my mouth! You have a truly horrible soul if you enjoy watching me sully the inside of my body like this!! You pervert!!”

“Why is that the only thing you can say to the person who made you some food!? In fact, there’s something fundamentally wrong at the point that I’m having to pay out of my own pocket to feed the girl who arrived here as collateral on an unrepaid loan!!”

One day, this girl had appeared before my apartment with a notice of a loan in hand.

I had feared it was some kind of false claim, but it turned out the positions of lender and borrower were reversed. In other words, she had come to my apartment as collateral on an unrepaid loan.

“But why did my grandfather lend some stranger money...?”

“We had completely forgotten about it, but it turns out we borrowed around ten million yen 50 years ago. If you adjust for inflation, that comes out to about 10 times as much. Also, that was a time when there were not many laws related to lending money, so the interest was at a ridiculous rate of 10% every 10 days.”

“And that’s why the daughter of a large conglomerate showed up at my student apartment?”

She was clearly wearing a dress.

She was clearly a princess.

She emitted an aura that made it hard to believe she belonged to modern society, and yet she was devouring rice from a 100 yen rice bowl.

“That was in the days when laws against such things had not been set, but since a contract was made, it cannot be helped.

“(…I’m betting grandpa just got carried away and added those parts at the last second.)”

“Did you say something?”

“No.”

“Anyway, back to this rice! It is impossible to describe how bad this is!! Someone who eats this every day cannot possibly be of a sound mind, but I have no choice, so give me more!!”

“The flow of your sentences is so mixed up it goes beyond tsundere!!”

I refilled the 100 yen rice bowl that also had a chipped edge with white rice and handed it back to the princess. She immediately began complaining again.

“After this torture you call a meal is over, I need you to take me to an imported furniture store. We need to at least have the bare minimum of what is necessary to live as human beings.”

“No!! You’re the one that’s indebted to me, so why should I go bankrupt for you!?”

“What are you talking about? What am I supposed to wear? When are you going to prepare a car with a chauffeur? Oh, and I would like a pet.”

“Have you never heard of the term LOHAS!?”

Girls treated as collateral for loans were often seen in dramas, but did I really gain anything from this?

The thought process of “Heh heh heh. I’ll do this and that to her.” would not occur unless she was incredibly attractive. This princess who was currently stuffing her mouth full of white rice with a sulky expression was certainly beautiful...but...how should I put it? She did not have any coquettishness to her. Just as how no one would get an erection while looking at the Mona Lisa, there was a difference between beautiful and erotic.

So what was there left for me?

From a purely monetary standpoint was there any value to a normal girl beyond what she could make at a part time job?

And this was a princess.

I doubted she could do something as simple as pull up some weeds, much less work a part time job. How was she supposed to be of any use to my life?

“Hey, princess. What are you going to do from now on? Y’know, about things like school.”

“Do you really need to ask that, you fool!? You hold the life of this poor, helpless caged bird in your hands. That means you must take responsibility and send me to a prestigious girls school, open a path for me to get into a prestigious university, and make sure I can enter a prestigious corporation.”

“I have to do all that!? You’re from a huge conglomerate. Can’t you just enter one of your group’s companies!? Hell, you could do that right now!! I’ve heard of even middle schoolers working as the president of a start-up!!”

“As soon as I was taken as collateral for that loan, my ties with the conglomerate were cut. I now belong to you.”

The princess must have missed her old life because she looked a bit despondent.

But was that true?

I was pretty sure I could see something glittering on the rooftop of the building across from the balcony. That wasn’t from binoculars or a sniper rifle’s scope was it!?

That was when the doorbell rang.

Hearing it, the princess said, “Go answer that, servant.”

“You are indebted to me!!”

With that pathetic remark, I headed for the front door. When I opened it, I found yet another strange girl standing there.

She also had ringlet curls, but they were done up in a way that was somehow

reminiscent of pigtails.

And she was short.

“Nywah ha ha!! So this is the Sargasso that onee-sama ended up in after her long time adrift!! It is even more chaotic than I had heard!!”

“This is so sudden, I really have no idea what is going on!!”

“...That is my younger sister. What are you doing here?”

“I merely came to tell you how good it feels after so many long years of being distanced from inheriting the family due to being born from a different mother and being the younger sibling!! By the way, poor student.”

The princess (second in line) put her hands on her hips, thrust her chest out in pride so much I thought she was going to go all the way back into a bridge, and smiled.

“What?”

“It seems you will soon fall into debt due to my sister’s manipulation. How about I pay for such things?”

“Mh!? Do not do it, servant!! She is attempting to indirectly gain control of me by binding you financially!! Do not give into temptation!!”

“Nywah ha ha!! It is too late, sister!! Money is justice. I think I will dress you in a maid uniform and have you play with me!!”

Her request showed a surprising hidden cuteness deep down within her, but her older sister paid that no heed. Instead, she shot back with a comment of her own while pouring miso soup onto the white rice in the rice bowl.

“...As another daughter of the conglomerate, do you not count as collateral on the loan as well?”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

And so...

File 12: A Santa Claus Trained as a Gentleman Thief

Santa Claus existed.

And he was quite nearby.

“Here’s your chasu-men! Oh, are you Santa Claus by any chance? Your outfit is all red.”

And yet this was a Chinese restaurant with the floor sticky with oil!!

“(Shh! You can’t do that, old lady! There’s a rule saying any children who learn Santa’s identity don’t get any presents! So don’t go around saying that!!)”

I frantically looked around, but it was lunchtime on a weekday, so there were no kids in the restaurant. All the good kids were in school. The only other customers were a pair of well-built foreigners.

“What’s that?”

“This is a bath poster.”

“Uh...Why are you taking it into the bathroom?”

“Hey! Don’t ask that! You’re insensitive!!”

They were speaking English, but from what I could gather of that exchange, they had not heard what we were saying over here.

The old lady looked puzzled.

“Why do you have a rule like that?”

“I didn’t make the rule, so I don’t know. After all, there are over a million Santas across the world. Now, time to eat.”

“Well, having dreams is a good thing, so keep up the good work.”

Just as the old lady left with a smile, my cell phone began to vibrate. While slurping up the noodles, I used my left hand to check the email.

(...Shit, I had a feeling it would end up like this.)

After finishing the chashu-men, I left the Chinese restaurant. A pure red sports car was stopped out front. Needless to say, that was Santa Claus's theme color. Well, I couldn't deny that a certain famous carbonated beverage had had a hand in that. But leaving that aside...

"Rightia, Leftail. ...Why do we have a two-seater when there's three of us?"

"Reindeer are viewed of as two to a group, so it can't be helped."

"And Santa is seen as sitting in the back, so it can't be helped."

"Keep this up, and I'll stick a bit in your mouth and whip you."

The two people speaking brazenly were both beautiful girls with long blonde hair. They were not twins. All modern reindeer were like that. They wore light brown fur coats and thick collars with small bells attached. Overall those partners of mine looked like their outfits had cost more than my own as Santa.

As I had no other choice, I crammed myself into the small luggage space.

"I read the email. I take it Shindou Mimi-chan's parents refused."

"Yes, but it wasn't for religious reasons."

"More accurately, the mother wanted to cooperate, but the father got really angry for some reason."

I clicked my tongue.

"So it's 2 against 1 if you count Mimi-chan. Continue."

Rightia practically jumped up from the passenger seat in joy at the sulky way I said that.

"Now we're talking! If the dad hates Santa, then Mimi-chan must have had a rough time of it when no present was delivered year after year. We need to give her something worth waking up to!!"

In contrast, Leftail tapped her index finger in irritation on the steering wheel and voiced her concerns.

“But, Santa. This is the home of the president of Peach Software, a multinational corporation. The industrial espionage countermeasures are probably some of the best in the country. How are we supposed to sneak in?”

Basically, Santa Claus went to the houses of all children who wanted a visit.

However, there were some houses that were difficult to deliver presents to for various reasons.

We were called in for those cases.

Those cases called for a Santa Claus trained as a gentleman thief.

“Rightia, did you get the blueprint of the mansion?” I asked, but the reindeer operating a tablet computer with her index finger shook her head.

“The data had been deleted from the construction company’s system.”

“Try their advertising firm. If I’m not mistaken, footage of that mansion being constructed was used in a TV ad. Only a dozen or so seconds was used, but it covered weeks of time. The ad let you see the mansion being built as if it was being fast forwarded.”

“I see. ...Oh, here it is. It looks like I can get a diagram from this footage.”

“Good, good. Leftail, how did the investigation go?”

“Mimi-chan wants one of those stuffed bears that moves based on an AI. She wrote it in one of the Christmas cards to Santa Claus that are sent from around the world to the Vatican. I have already purchased it.”

“Okay. That just leaves their security.”

Peach Software did not leave its security to some external security company. Instead, the group had bought up an entire security company and had them protect the secrets of the multinational corporation using a unique routine. Naturally, they were very well trained. As the company was left in charge of some military software, they had to deal with foreign spies disguised as industrial spies on occasion. I had heard that the guards had more than handled them.

In other words, a standard Santa Claus could not handle this.

There was a good reason that Mimi-chan had never before been delivered a present.

“I can dig up the locations of cameras and sensors using the diagram of the mansion, but I won’t be able to ‘see’ where the flesh-and-blood guards patrol. I doubt that data will be easily stolen either.”

We would be taking on an opponent of that caliber without practice.

It would certainly not be fun.

“This is dangerous. If it turns into a straight fight, there is nothing the three of us can do.”

Despite what she was saying, Rightia seemed to be enjoying herself very much.

I calmly replied to the mini-skirt reindeer to bring back her self control.

“I have never heard of a Santa Claus charging in through the front door. We sneak in during the dead of night.”

“If the mother wants to cooperate, how about we try contacting her?”

“Do you really think that old man will let that happen? He’s always boasting about the overwhelming market share his internet browser and smartphone have. In fact, he made that tablet you’re using. Don’t you think he would intercept any contact we tried to make?”

“That’s it!” I snapped my fingers. “Let’s contact the mama knowing that the old man will intercept it. If we give them a false infiltration route, the guards will focus in that direction.”

“Then why don’t we send a card announcing what we’re going to do? Or rather, 50 or even 100 of them. Even if he knows most of them are false, he’ll have to post a certain level of security at all of them. That will leave fewer guards where we need to go.”

“If we’re gonna use a bluff, why don’t we make it as flashy as possible? Something like firing the present through a window using a small rocket. That way they would have to keep an eye on things away from the mansion as well.”

Those were the kinds of methods a Santa Claus would use to find a way in.

We were thought of as the representative of miracles, but what we actually did was rather down-to-earth.

“Okay, three more days...”

“Hee hee hee. This will be cutting it pretty close, won’t it?”

“I’d say this isn’t as bad as when we snuck into the residence of the president from that EU nation.”

“That isn’t what I meant.”

“?”

“?”

“Unless that front comes in, this won’t be a White Christmas.”

Our target was an impregnable mansion.

Protecting it was a private unit of security guards that caused even military intelligence departments to pale. The difficulty level of this job was about as high as it got and it was entirely possible we could be killed.

But we might as well just do it.

It wasn’t Santa Claus’s job to calculate out the risks and returns. We would merely make a visit in the darkness of the night to deliver presents to the children who wished for them.

The voices of children returning home could be heard along a twilit street.

“What did you ask Santa for?”

“Games! That new 3D system!!”

“I asked for a baseball uniform!!”

“Wait. Are we really supposed to tell people before the presents are delivered?”

With the contents of their backpacks making clunking noises, the children ran along the wide road, cheering at all the decorative lights.

One girl among them was left behind.

As she stood still, she looked up into the cloudy sky.

“I wonder if he’ll actually come this year...”

(We will make sure of it.)

The Santa Claus and reindeer that passed by her on the street swore that in their hearts.

As long as children made those clumsy requests...

As long as they desired to meet Christmas morning with a smile...

A real Santa Claus deployed from Norway would break through any form of security and sneak into that mansion.

Midpoint and a Short Break

A quick announcement.

I hope the survey is going well for you.

If for some reason you are not yet participating in the survey, please hurry up and begin.

Now, after a short break, I would like to get back to the survey.

File 13: How About We Try Taking a Peek?

We lived in an age where you could take a peek into hell.

The developer of the technology had originally been trying to peek into heaven, but theologians from around the world had vehemently opposed this idea. They claimed only those who had gone through the proper process should be able to see heaven.

Some of them were of the opinion that seeing hell would be okay, and in the end, permission to peek into hell was given on the grounds that seeing how horrible it was would give everyone a change of heart about their lives. Some suggested the technology be officially classified as educational software.

...But it did not exactly turn out that way.

“Hello? Ashtart?”

As I was using a handheld game system in the free LAN corner of a fast food restaurant, a woman’s voice came from the screen.

But it was not a human woman.

“What is it, boy? Having you humans peeking in with your handheld game systems and everything gets exhausting. Intentionally showing and being peeked on are completely different things.”

“Ashtart, I had heard hell was a horrible, painful place of suffering. But from what I can see, everyone looks pretty relaxed.”

“Why do you think hell exists?”

“?”

“Why do you think?”

“To take in all the people who did bad things?”

“That’s right. But that role was decided on by god. There are a lot of different kinds of demons, but my faction was given permission by god to mess with humans. Just read up on the demon named Mastema to learn more about this.”

“But, Ashtart, you’re not doing anything to the humans. With that swimsuit on, it looks more like you’re on vacation.”

She had long red hair and pure white skin. She had what would generally be referred to as a “glamorous body”, but with horns and bat-like wings. The way her tail twitched back and forth kind of made me want to grab it.

“That’s because it’s all such a pain in the ass.”

While lying on a beach chair, Ashtart wiggled her hips back and forth.

“With the image of demons that humans have come up with and the moderate trials and tribulations for humans god has commanded us to carry out, it just feels like so much is expected of us. But we’re demons. Our creed is to go against every single thing we’re told to do.”

“Hm? Hmm???”

As I ate french fries with a puzzled look, Ashtart lightly raised her index finger.

“Hell is only a horrible place if demons carry out their job well. But demons are not the type to work diligently. If you multiply a negative with a negative, what do you get? A positive!! Basically, hell has become an unprecedented beach resort because it is run by demons who have no motivation whatsoever!!”

Ashtart seemed really confident, but what was that about multiplying negatives? If you had four boxes with three apples in each, that was 3×4 which was 12. I had learned that in school...but if you lost 4 sets of “three things missing” you got...more???? That had to be something from the world of philosophy. Demons really thought about mysterious things.

“Oh, have you not been taught how to multiply negative numbers yet?”

“So heaven isn’t the good place to go?”

“Angels are quite diligent, so I’m sure they make sure it’s a nice place. After all, a positive number multiplied by a positive number is still positive. But just

because heaven is a nice place does not mean hell has to be the exact opposite. This is a pretty nice place, too. But if people knew that, they would not go through all the unpleasantness people go through when they aim for getting into heaven, so we had tried to keep it a secret. But thanks to your technology, you all know now!!”

Ashtart stuck out her tongue and scratched at her horned head while I nodded.

“How strange.”

“It is strange. For some reason, you humans got it into your heads that we demons were after your souls or something, but bad people just automatically come to hell after they die, so we really have no reason to head out into the human world. Also, why do you think we would go along with our reason for existing and be diligently evil? All we demons do is disappoint the god who gave us that reason for existing.”

“So because you’re expected to do bad things, you don’t do bad things?”

“Exactly. And those theologians who just assume we do bad things are the ones whose expectations we want to live up to the least.”

Ashtart sipped a blue drink from a glass using a straw.

“I just want to laze around, so it really doesn’t matter to me, but if I was asked whether you should aim for heaven or hell, I would say hell I suppose. They’re both pleasant enough places, but heaven is strict about honesty and integrity. You can’t live in quite as much luxury. Hell’s easier because you don’t have to worry about that kind of thing. If you feel like you want to do something, you just do it. I honestly don’t understand why that idiot Satan is trying to make a comeback in heaven. What’s wrong with being bound in hell? It’s nice and warm here.”

“That sounds nice, Ashtart.”

“How about you take a 3 day trip to hell to try it out?”

“Can I?”

“Sure, sure. Didn’t I tell you? Things are real casual here. No one has any

motivation. Heaven might be all uptight about qualifications and discipline, but we don't care about all that here in hell. If you want to come, just come. You can find out what this drink tastes like. I'll give you a ticket to hell."

Right after Ashtart said that, the light on my handheld game system lit up. It was informing me of an email. It was likely the ticket Ashtart had mentioned.

I moved to touch the screen so I could go and have fun, but...

“Huh?”

“What is it, boy?”

"I have a call coming in."

“...Game systems sure are convenient these days.”

The second I hit the button, an unfamiliar female voice shouted at me.

[illegible]

“Nyahh!?”

“Geh. Is that Gabriel’s voice!? It has to be. She’s the only female angel.”

I practically fell backwards in my chair, but the female voice continued shouting over the phone.

“You innocent lamb!! Due to certain reasons, I cannot visit you, but I can give you a lecture. Do not head to hell so casually!!”

“Eh? But Ashtart said...”

“That’s right. That’s right. I sent him a proper invitation, so it isn’t entering illegally or anything. Hurry on over so we can play with the beach ball.”

“Lamb, why do you wish to go to hell?”

“Because the demons have no motivation so it’s like a beach resort. How about you put on a swimsuit too, Gabriel.”

“Heh heh heh. That’s right! That’s right! Put on an I-front micro bikini!!”

“Shut up, you damn whore!! A-ahem. It is true that the technology humans have developed makes hell look like an area with white sand and a blue ocean where the demons laze around doing whatever they want. But...”

“But?”

“But you should know better than to trust a demon! Do you really think that white sand and blue ocean are actually there!?”

File 14: Would You Like Something from the Human Face Series?

Cyborgs had become fairly widespread, but they had not overcome the barrier of the human form. If the silhouette of the human body was altered too much, specialized movement software had to be installed which seemed to alter the human mind into something else.

Due to this, humans still operated tools with their fingers and used pens to write or draw.

However...

“Honey, look. It’s a frying pan with artificial skin attached. Because of the heat detection sensors, it says we can say goodbye to burnt food!”

“That soft, flesh-colored frying pan scares me!! It looks like an evil book from the Cthulhu mythos!!”

“This ladle has lips. It tastes the contents and displays the result numerically. How cute.”

These pots and cutting boards and the like with incredibly realistic human ears or noses or whatever attached were known as Half Appliances. I could not understand how my young wife could be calling them “cute”. Perhaps I was just an old-fashioned type of person.

I of course understood that it was nothing more than using cyborg technology to attach sensors that surpassed the ability of the human senses, but still.

“Honey, are you bored because this is the cooking section?”

“N-no, that’s not it. I just find it suspicious that an area filled with ears and noses can be called the ‘cooking section’.”

“I guess a guy would prefer the section with the digital cameras and such. I

think they have ones with eyeballs for seeing super long distances.”

“That’s scary!! That’s really scary!! Am I the only one that finds an SLR camera that blinks and has eyelashes to be horrifying!?”

Crime rates had dropped ever since eyeballs had been attached to security cameras, but I thought that was because it made you feel there was some strange, raw gaze on your back.

They were very unpopular when used in apartment complexes or hotels.

“Oh, right. Honey, you said you wanted some tools for yard work, right? I think they have the lawnmowers over there.”

“All I see are machines with multiple arms covered in sharp fingernails and machines with mouths filled with tons of giant human teeth.”

“Yes. Those might be a bit big for our house.”

What my young wife was saying seemed a bit off. Actually, looking at society at large, it might have been my opinion that was a bit off.

I didn’t like how they had attached realistic human eyes and noses to the front of bullet trains as sensors. I knew it was more efficient that way, but I just didn’t like it.

The shape of humans themselves had not changed too much.

However, the technology still remained. And the idea of a more convenient life in the future had remained as well. However, to reach it, the technology had spread to everything around humans rather than the humans themselves.

Thanks to this, cell phones had ear drums built in and portable game systems had artificial synapses inside.

The way of the world changed quickly.

Just as adults had once been unable to keep up with the society of the internet, I was unable to keep up with these psychedelic changes to the scenery.

“Do you want a new electric razor?”

“You need to replace the artificial blood in those too quickly, so no.”

“Yes, filling it with oxygen again and again wears it out.”

“Speaking of artificial blood, we need to replace the blood in the fridge before long, don’t we? They’re having a sale over there.”

“We can’t. Ours is a Carrier QW2. It can’t use Type B. But we should buy some cerebrospinal fluid. The flyer mentioned a multi-pack.”

On our way, we passed by a dog-type pet robot. It seemed to be a display model. It was a product that would bleed if you hurt it but would cause no guilt if you broke it.

“I wonder if these appliances will ever take on the same form as humans.”

If they developed that far, I felt the grotesqueness would disappear.

But...

“We can’t have that.”

“Why not?”

“Because then we would just leave everything to the appliances and never move an inch. That’s no different from being bedridden.”

Perhaps she was right.

Old peddler ladies from the old days had carried around an unbelievable amount of things without much trouble.

“But...”

“What is it, honey?”

“Then I’m not sure who controls who.”

“?”

“I mean.” I paused for a second. “We buy all these tools to make our own lives easier, but the strength of our legs and back are being decided by how convenient these tools are. ...You could almost say that we are being remade into forms that make it easier to use these appliances.”

File 15: Better Made than the Real Deal

A girl with a childlike face and large breasts knelt down in the courtyard behind a television station. She was stirring something within a pot set atop a portable stove, but she was not cooking curry for a campout.

“Chief, do you not feel like you’re wasting food when you cook ketchup like this? And there’s mizuame in here, too.”

“Twenty percent of the money our shows get is given to the white cross. People who do nothing more than put some loose change in the container next to the convenience store register have no right to get mad at us. ...But this really stinks. Paint isn’t supposed to be cooked in a pot.”

It was thanks to that smell that we had to make this prop outside rather than while holed up in the station’s storage room. This was a trade secret. I hoped no information on it would be stolen by doing it out in the open.

The new young girl (with large breasts) stirred the contents of the pot like it was a stew.

“Chief, couldn’t we leave the fake blood to an outside company?”

“No. The default fake blood is too plain. The color is too subdued.”

“Too subdued?”

The new young girl tilted her head cutely despite the fact that no cameras were running. I proceeded to explain it to her in detail.

“Dramas have to be really flashy, right? Just look at the actors’ makeup, the costumes, and the sets. The colors have to be bolder than they are in reality because powerful lights will be shined on them. A normal blood color won’t cut it. If you used real blood, it would actually look unnatural.”

“Oh. So it has to be brighter than normal blood?”

“...You mixed it up without knowing what you were trying to do?” I sighed.
“Once you have the base color made, mix in some black, bit by bit.”

“Why? I thought it had to be brighter?”

“There are different colors depending on the amount of time that is supposed to have passed. Normal blood changes color over time, but fake blood won’t. That means we need to create different types of fake blood to represent the hardening process over time.”

“That’s a lot of work.”

“And for all that work, it isn’t even being used as much anymore. That’s why there are fewer people that know how to do it. That’s why someone with as long-winded a title on his business card as me is stuck cooking it up in a pot.”

“Come to think of it, the revision in broadcasting ethics led to scenes with blood being a lot less common.”

“The drop in the popularity of period dramas and police dramas was another big factor.”

“They still have police dramas.” The new girl made a gun out of the hand not stirring the pot and said, “Bang.”

But I shook my head.

“But they don’t have flashy gunfights or anything. It is true that resolving anything and everything with an action scene gets predictable, though. These forensic dramas advertise themselves as always catching the criminal from the smallest piece of evidence, but I always have to wonder why there are never any bloodstains.”

“What about medical dramas? The surgery scenes use blood in a non-violent way.”

The large-breasted girl seemed to be trying to make a surgical gesture, but it just looked like she was cutting a piece of meat with fork and knife to me.

“Those are always about the human drama leading up to the surgery, so the actual surgery scene isn’t all that important. They can get by just by showing a close up of the doctor’s sweating face.”

“That is because actual surgeries take hours. The doctors’ movements are small, so it is difficult to give them much impact.”

“Yeah, so they just play some random background music and show the family praying for the patient’s survival. They just have to use a sprayer to put sweat on their faces.”

I stuck a clear plastic plate into the pot to check on the redness of the fake blood.

...It was no good.

“Instead of mixing in black paint, it might be better to just burn it bit by bit.”

“I think that would make it difficult to make it in large quantities.”

“Something dark...dark... Brown sugar maybe?”

“If it wasn’t for the paint, you could eat that fake blood.”

“But paint is the easiest.”

The broadcasting industry sounded like a flashy thing, but this was the kind of thing you ended up doing.

“Anyway, newcomer. Are you keeping notes on what you’re putting in and in what quantities?”

“Yes, I am. I would like to create an instruction manual for this. I don’t want to have to go through this guessing game every time.”

The new girl pointed toward a pastel-colored memo pad lying on the asphalt of the courtyard walking path. The pages had bears, chicks, and other animal mascots printed on them, so it looked like it would be difficult to use. I caught a whiff of some sweet smell, but I was unsure if it was part of the product or if it was coming from the large-breasted girl herself.

“By the way, chief, what show is this going to be used for?”

“A variety show.”

“...That seems like the one most likely to make people angry if it has this kind of red in it.”

“A former wrestler is coming on as a guest. We’re going to hit him with an 18

liter container and 'bloody' him up."

"And it won't be staged!?"

"The screen will say in giant letters that it was, but the former wrestler himself will be the only one in the dark. How seriously he treats it will make the viewers laugh."

"Ohh." The new girl looked like she wanted to say something. "So you're getting ratings by ruining your human relations?"

"He's the one who gave up fighting but is now coming to us begging to be paid for an appearance. We have to embarrass him a bit."

"But, chief."

"What?"

"You made a whole bunch of fake blood back when your title was more like mine, right?"

"Yeah, the police dramas of my day were something else. We used such an insane amount of fake blood that the actors sometimes almost drowned."

"Then shouldn't you already have notes on how best to make fake blood?"

"I do. Or rather, I did. The past tense needs to be used here."

"Why can't we use that? Oh, is it a station or patent issue?"

"No. The notes on how to make fake blood were lost."

"How?"

"When I was new here, the station made fake blood all the time. Another reason for that was simply because it was cheaper than buying it from some other company. By the way, do you know what show used the most fake blood?"

"Some kind of legendary police drama? Period dramas have surprisingly little blood for how much slicing there is."

"It wasn't either of those."

I suddenly wanted to smoke a cigarette quite badly.

It was probably because I was being reminded of the past.

Or perhaps I wanted something to calm myself given what I was about to talk about.

“It was a cryptid research show.”

“Eh? What’s that?”

“I guess you might not know if you were born in the Heisei era. They would do things like head somewhere overseas to search for the mysterious giant known as Bigfoot. Naturally, these types of shows faked things all the time. Nowadays, that kind of things violates the broadcast ethics, so you don’t see those shows on the air anymore.”

“What was the fake blood needed for? Did they fake being attacked by the mysterious giant?”

The large-breasted girl let out a roar and flung her arms up in imitation of a monster. But she was still holding the ladle used to stir the fake blood, so she got everything dirty.

“Ahh! You idiot! This is a suit!!”

“It’s 30,000 yen for two of them, right? And that’s for the top, bottom, and tie set.”

“If you think that’s so cheap, then pay for it!!”

“You know how much my hourly wage is, so how can you say that!? Just write it off as a business expense. It was a loss caused during proper work! Anyway, back to the cryptid thing. How was the fake blood used on the show?”

“I don’t know,” was my honest answer.

Yes.

Twenty years had passed, but I still had not come up with an answer.

“The cryptid research show was a special program that ran at a pace of about one episode every 6 months, but they asked for tons of fake blood every single time. But that was it. I never learned what they used it for. There was never a scene with blood in the actual broadcast show. No one understood what they

were using it for. All I know is...”

“All you know is...?”

“When the series was about to be cancelled, someone trashed the station’s storage room, throwing every single bit of stocked fake blood everywhere. The lock hadn’t been picked. It looked like it had been forced open by some great force. The notes on how to make the fake blood had been stored with the fake blood itself. It was stained with so much fake blood that no one could read it anymore. The guy who had made the recipe had resigned by then and he said he didn’t remember the particular amounts, so we just gave up.”

“Eh? What do you mean by ‘some great force’? Do you think it was something faked by that show?”

“It might have been.” I yawned. “The director who went to all the overseas locations for the show had someone trash his house in a similar fashion and he never returned to the house. We also received a few suspicious phone calls from a foreign number, but only ever heard animalistic growling. My best guess is it was all a last ditch attempt to revive interest and keep the show’s ratings from falling any further.”

File 16: Those Spoken of in Legends

The demon king is looking this way as if she wants to join the party!

I was wearing armor with a skirt. It looked showy, but it caused horrible scratches all over the bottom half of my body while walking through forests and over mountains. (Why did the public want hero girls to dress like this? It made me dread riding a horse. It would rub directly on my legs!) Meanwhile, I swung my sword up and shouted.

“No! You’re the demon king, so you can’t do that! We have to settle this!! I want to defeat the demon king and head back to the kingdom!! This long journey of staying in cheap inns has left me covered in so much sweat you would have a hard time calling me a maiden!! Please just let me sleep in my own bed!!”

“Yeah, but I’m not too happy about this either,” complained a little girl with goat horns coming from her head, bat wings coming from her back, and something like a tail coming from her butt. She was wearing all leather and sitting in the throne with her arms wrapped around her knees. “I took in and raised the elites of my demon king army and my mermaid unit led by an idol officer. So why did they betray me so easily after you kicked their asses!? Give me back the time and money I spent on them!! Actually, if they’ll change their affiliation based on violence, I’ll just kick their asses back onto my side!!”

“I understand how you feel, but let’s just fight. Otherwise this legend will never end.”

“Surely you’re feeling a bit disillusioned after going so far as to make allies of the demon king army and then finding village leaders and others who are causing people to suffer (by holding bizarre rituals in the villages and such). Aren’t you beginning to wonder why you’re risking your life for all humans

when so many of them are like that!?”

I wasn't sure what she was shouting about, so I just corrected her with a puzzled look.

“No, I just slice right through any human bosses. They have almost no combat ability but they still give boss levels of experience points, so they're quite convenient.”

“That's some frightening justice!! I-is that the source of the hero's ever-growing power!?”

“I suppose the failure of the demon king army is their lack of a level up system. That takes out half the fun of battle.”

“That's partially to prevent the lords from rebelling against me. The demon king has to be the strongest one, after all. Also...”

“What?”

“Don't you think we've been oddly cast?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why are both the demon king and the hero a girl? If one of us was a guy, you could add all sorts of things to the story like us falling in love and being troubled by the other's position.”

The hero inspired the people with her legend and the demon king brought fear to the world with her legend. Simply put, an attractive legend would rule the world. For that reason, we paid more attention than you would think to how the world viewed us. We continually repeated action scenes with unnecessary acrobatics in order to give material that the bards would naturally add into their stories.

For that reason, I did understand where the demon king was coming from with her misgivings.

“These days, a guy to identify with is no longer needed. It seems people would prefer to peer down with a god's eye view into conversations between girls.”

“When I think about that, it just seems really creepy.”

“From the point of view of those being spied on, of course it does. But let me tell you something, demon king. The thing that seems most off to me is your appearance. Why are you a little girl?”

“Wh-what do you mean by that? I’ve lived for 20,000 years yet I still look like this, so it can’t be helped!”

From her position on the throne with her arms wrapped around her knees, the demon king stretched her arms and legs straight out as she protested.

She might have been trying to make her body look larger.

“Hm? Isn’t a female final boss usually more the glamorous type? So what’s with this AAA? Is that a safety standard?”

“Shut up! Jokes like that hurt!! And if you’re going to go there, then isn’t it odd for the hero’s to be so gigantic!? No one can empathize with such a perfect body!! What’s this H nonsense? Is that special made? That kind of figure fits best with a sage or some other side role!!”

“Well, I am the representative of the people. Come to think of it, what does it say about the demon king army that they bow down to a little girl as their representative?”

“Don’t be so rude!! They were captivated by my strength!!”

The demon king swung her arms and legs around while wriggling about in the throne.

But despite how she looked, caution was needed. She did have the power to call down asteroids from the heavens to submerge entire continents.

Then again, I did not particularly care if the king died in a great disaster after he had handed me a wooden stick and requested that I attack the demon king army.

“Hey, hero girl.”

“What?”

“Don’t you think it would just be a pain in the ass for us to fight?”

“To be honest, I was just thinking that I no longer need to do what the king

says now that I've leveled up so much. But we should probably still resolve this."

"We could, but what would you do after that? Surely you don't think destroying the demon king army and reestablishing human society will resolve every single problem and leave you with nothing but a happy ending, right?"

"Hmm... I had vaguely realized that. I guess it would be hopeless," I muttered blankly.

The demon king must have been feeling a little more on her game because she leaned back in the throne and folded her legs.

It made me really want to put her in a figure-four leg lock.

"You know, hero girl, this world would fall under the rule of a king who ordered a teenage girl to defeat a demon king with nothing but a stick. It's obvious there would be countless mistakes if he was on top. And I get the feeling he would outdo even my expectations in that regard."

"Eh? Then what am I supposed to do? Kick the king's ass?"

The demon king was feeling even more full of herself now that I had carelessly gone along with her line of conversation, so she placed her elbow on the armrest and rested her chin in her hand. I had to admit, she looked a lot more like a demon king in that pose.

The way she had been sitting with her arms around her knees had been wrong.

"And then who would rule the world once the king was gone? You have to think things through, hero. This is what I've been talking about. You need to train the next generation. Whether it's the demon king army or the human king, just destroying them won't bring about a happy ending. In fact, when it comes to pure destructive power, you're a lot like the pure demon king of my grandfather's day, hero."

"You mean the 8 bit demon king? He comes up sometimes in the stories on old stone monuments. The battles back then were so simple. It sounds like a lot of fun."

“Back then, ‘I am the demon king, so I will destroy the world!!’ would cut it. Nowadays, I bet the bards wouldn’t know what to do with that.”

“And I heard you couldn’t save partway through. To tell the whole story, the bards had to go for 50 hours nonstop.”

The goat-horned little girl raised her index finger and said, “How about you create a hero army? Something other than the human army. That way, whoever wins the battle can use their army to govern the world.”

“I’m not sure anyone could stand up to my incredibly harsh training. Also, I’m such a strict martial artist-type that I came all the way here without putting together a party.”

“Go far enough down the path of inducing fear, and it’s no different from having charisma. Could you let me see the manual?”

“As the hero, I can’t do that.”

“How can you say that after you silenced my monsters with your fists and awakened them to the path of masochism? The way I see it, it doesn’t matter who wins because either of us can construct a world bound together by fear.”

“No fair!! You’re trying to bring about an ending where the hero wins but succumbed to the demon king’s curse, aren’t you!? You’re trying to take all the good parts for yourself!! And you’d just get revived later when the dark power filling the world was gathered, wouldn’t you!?”

“Then do you have a more heroic vision of how to handle this? Something other than just doing what the king says?”

Faced with that question, I was at a loss for words.

I restlessly fidgeted my fingers for a bit before speaking.

“Well, there are some things I’d like to do. For example, I could run an armed hero delivery service. The world still has a certain level of monsters in it, so transporting goods can be difficult. A high level hero like me could make a lot of money accompanying a wagon caravan between towns.”

“If you’ve thought it through that much, why don’t you just go do it!? Wait, is that why you brought my monsters under your control!?”

“But if I kick the king’s ass for the sake of my own advancement, I wouldn’t be a hero, would I!? This would be a lot simpler if he was being controlled by evil or something like that!! Demon king, why didn’t you deceive the king? In fact, if the king hadn’t given that order, a hero like me would never have headed out to defeat the demon king!!”

The goat-horned demon king sighed at my simplistic questions.

“He’s incompetent. His only skill is at staying in power as king. He’s a politician. To be honest, I underestimated you because you were a hero prepared by him. I’ve lived for 20,000 years and you’re the first hero to ever get this far.”

“Demon kings always underestimate the heroes. You always spare us early on, saying we are not even worth killing if we would die at so early a stage. It seems like you actually aid our growth if you ask me.”

“Oh, when you’re Level 2 or 3, you challengers just seem cute. Something like a puppy recklessly nipping at your heels. The problem is when you get to Level 300 and have ridiculous strength. Then you get to attack 5 times in a single turn and you have ultimate elemental attacks that ignore defense and can one-shot even my generals. You grow up too fast.”

She must have been recalling when I had been a “puppy” because the demon king pouted her lips, folded her arms, and swung her dangling feet. In that goat-horned little girl’s head might have been an image of my once innocent self biting at those dangling feet.

“So you have the same view as a horrible pet lover who boxes up their cat or dog and throws them outside once they grow too big. That’s a demon king for you. You always head down the path of evil.”

“Yes, but those pets grow giant and become a member of my demon king army, so it’s a great deal for me.”

“You do think things through, I’ll give you that.”

The demon king’s expression turned somehow weary at that comment of admiration.

“Well, I do run an army and a kingdom. Sometimes I wish I was a freelancer

like you heroes.”

“You, the demon king, feel constrained?”

“Yes, I do!! Everyone is always demanding I lower taxes, but they also insist I add more to their social security!! There’s something wrong when the demon king’s kingdom has a greater budget for bioenergy than for national defense which is what pays to fight against heroes like you! Don’t you think, hero!?”

“I thought you were the demon king because you were the strongest of the monsters? Why are you that bound by their wishes? If you don’t like something, can’t you just kick their asses to shut them up?”

“That’s the thing with you freelancers. You say you’re fighting to protect, but you can think of nothing but destruction. We’re the one that has worked so hard to stockpile dungeons and ancient superweapons. If it wasn’t for our efforts, the legend of the hero would have been really boring.”

“Sigh. If only I was the demon king. Then things would be more...”

“If only I was the hero. Then by now, I’d be...”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

According to the bards, the hero and the demon king made a bet on some kind of prize and began the final battle.

It is unclear what that prize was.

But...

Despite it being the “final” battle, both the hero and the demon king survived.

And no one needs the songs to remind them that the history of the world then underwent a change great enough to make the prophets faint.

File 17: Attribute Colors for the Palette

The positions of punishment and reward were swapped.

Basically, instead of criminals being punished under criminal law, those who worked for the sake of society or another individual were given a proper reward. That was the essence of the Karma Equilibrium Law.

In that world where everyone supported everyone else, not being kind to everyone effectively meant you would lose your means of living, so the crime rate really did lower.

“So, master!! That is why I, a super schoolteacher tsundere childhood-friend small-animal-type gothic-lolita household fad-follower assault maid, have come here to repay you!!”

“That was a hell of a lot! What are you!? Something like a ramen with everything on it!?”

I had a feeling that having her before my front door would cause issues with the neighborhood, or with judging me, or with rumors, or something destructive! My confusion was putting me at a loss for words, so I could not come up with any concrete ideas, but you get the picture.

And before my thoughts could recover, the ramen with everything on it continued speaking.

“The world is not so kind as to allow you to simply be a maid these days. To survive, you need to add on more attributes. That’s why I am a maid with 10 different attributes! Feel free to tremble in fear at just what kind of dream life awaits you!!”

“Isn’t childhood friend impossible?”

“I can forge as many memories and home videos as you like.”

She was quite the professional.

And so I decided to go with yet another question!

“What kind of attribute is ‘super’?”

“I think it has to do with being a reporter that transforms into full-body tights.”

“Oh, I thought it meant your whole body would glow gold.”

Anyway...

“I don’t recall doing anything worth being rewarded by the Karma Equilibrium Law. What did I do and who did I save?”

“Well, master, you dropped a 100 yen coin in front of the drink vending machine the other day, remember?”

“Yeah. I lost it when it fell into a manhole.”

“That 100 yen coin turned into a horse racing ticket that paid back 100 times. That money grew even further via pachinko, but was then robbed. When a brave youth stopped the robber, the attaché case it was in slid down a slope. It ended up being used in day trading. Half of the fortune made off of it was donated to poor children in a certain country. In its use, oil was discovered and now all the hunger and poverty issues of that country are resolved.”

“That kind of chain of events can happen in reality!?”

“At any rate, master, your karma has come out on the plus side at the level of permanently saving the lives of 5 million people. According to the calculations, your karma could never be brought to equilibrium in your lifetime unless a super schoolteacher tsundere childhood-friend small-animal-type gothic-lolita household fad-follower assault maid was sent to you.”

I sighed.

To be honest, nothing could have made me happier than to have a maid, but what was she supposed to do? She would finish cleaning my small apartment in no time at all.

“So please have me fight.”

“Hmm!? Where did that dangerous term come from!?”

“I belong to you until your karma has been brought into equilibrium, master. That also means that my own karma is yours to bear....and (I did a lot of things I am not proud of and that earned me a lot of grudges while working to become a super schoolteacher tsundere childhood-friend small-animal-type gothic-lolita household fad-follower assault maid.)”

“What was that you just said so quickly!? Are you saying I’m now liable for your debts!?”

However, shouting about it would not help. When criminal punishments declined, those who had established proof of their right to revenge had gained the right to take vengeance.

And so....

“Fwa ha ha ha ha!! So you are that super schoolteacher tsundere childhood-friend small-animal-type gothic-lolita household fad-follower assault maid’s new master!! I am a cat-ear dog-ear rabbit-ear bear-ear monkey-ear rhino-ear cow-ear mouse-ear panda-ear koala-ear reindeer-ear kangaroo-ear gothic-lolita girl! I am here to take vengeance!!”

“That’s too many types of animals!! You’re like some kind of chimaera! And why stick with ears for all of them!? You could have at least used the horns for the reindeer!! You don’t have some disturbing fixation with ears, do you!? Also, didn’t this maid already take gothic lolita?”

However, the super schoolteacher tsundere childhood-friend small-animal-type gothic-lolita household fad-follower assault maid seemed shocked by the appearance of this strange visitor.

“T-twelve attributes!? This is no normal girl...!!”

“Heh. I have so many I could try for a Guinness World Record before long if I was an ice cream shop. This is the way the world is headed.”

“N-not good. She might be the unparalleled type!”

I started wondering if this maid could even handle the basics like cooking and cleaning. Battle ability was not what you looked for in a maid.

“Th-this is bad. She simply has too many attributes. I can’t win against this!!”

“And what happens if you lose?”

“Isn’t it obvious? She will take vengeance. She might take a vegetable grater to my ankles and make grated radish out of them. ...And she will do the same to you as you are liable for my debts now.”

“That’s too heavy to get someone wrapped up in as a joke!! And another thing, you super schoolteacher...Jugemu Jugemu! What did you do before coming here!?”

“Please do not abbreviate it because it is a pain to say, master! Our attributes are the symbols of our lives!!”

“Here I go!!” shouted the other girl.

The cat-ear dog-ear rabbit-ear bear-ear monkey-ear rhino-ear cow-ear mouse-ear panda-ear koala-ear reindeer-ear kangaroo-ear gothic-lolita girl quickly took a meaningless pose.

“Take this universal special attack that corresponds to the 12 constellations!!!!!!”

“Then at least use the animals corresponding to the constellations as your attributes!!”

“Some of them are things like scales, so that’s impossible!”

As I did not want to be turned into grated radish, I had to join in the battle whether I wanted to or not. The rules seemed to have the battle decided by the number of attributes you had, so the super schoolteacher tsundere childhood-friend small-animal-type gothic-lolita household fad-follower assault maid had the buttons of her top burst off, exposing her chest, had some thick medals removed from her military-looking hat, and chicken blood sprinkled over the knife set she had.

“Umm, I’ll add lewd, bus driver, and yandere. That gives me 13.”

“Dobashaaa!!!!!!”

While letting out that meaningless shout that might have been some kind of sound effect, the super schoolteacher tsundere childhood-friend small-animal-

type gothic-lolita household fad-follower assault lewd bus-driver yandere maid
blew away the cat-ear dog-ear rabbit-ear bear-ear monkey-ear rhino-ear cow-
ear mouse-ear panda-ear koala-ear reindeer-ear kangaroo-ear gothic-lolita girl.

She (I'll just stick with that. It's easier) flew surprisingly far before hitting the ground. Blood trailed from the corner of her mouth, but she gave a pale smile as she gathered up the last of her strength.

"G-gbh... Heh. I am actually a boss on the side of good who is only pretending to oppose you in order to help you grow..."

"Wh-what!?"

"And that gives me 13 attributes, so I can fight evenly once more!! Attack!!"

"At least stick with the ear theme! And that adds the straight man attribute, giving me 14!! Attack!!"

I could hear nothing but explosions and see nothing but flashes of light.

All the glass in my apartment had broken, but I was not sure who I was supposed to charge for the damages.

But then I started to be able to see what lay behind the billowing smoke.

"Huh? I had more attributes, so I should have won!"

"No, I used my boss-on-the-side-of-good attribute to get in a surprise attack. That gave me the traitor attribute which gave me a total of 14 just like you. And by fighting against an even opponent, I gained the rival attribute! And this long-winded explanation has added on the exposition character attribute! I now have sixteeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeennnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn!!"

"Then I gain the unfortunate character attribute for having the situation turned around on me like that. That's 15. Being the type of character that meets the enemy in combat no matter what gives me 16. And coming up with these ideas to turn around such a desperate situation makes me a mystery-solving character. That's seventeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeennnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn!!"

After that, the two girls continued to add on more and more attributes. There was waitress, nurse, race queen, flight attendant, sailor uniform, cheerleader,

shrine maiden, nun, fundoshi, sexy swimsuit, school swimsuit, buruma, bike shorts, samba, hula girl, cowgirl, bunny girl, princess, student council president, stage magician, reverse trap, fairy, goddess, dominatrix, ninja, samurai, china dress, ao dai, android, cyborg, AI, and many more. The wind was sliced, gravity was thrown out of order, dimensional holes were opened, something like a black hole appeared, and ridiculous explosions occurred.

“...Are neither of you going to claim the battle-type attribute?”

When I said that, the battle calmed down a bit.

I stared through the dust and smoke to see what was going on beyond it. What I saw was a girl wearing a completely normal maid uniform and a girl wearing a completely normal gothic lolita outfit. They were seated in the seiza style and facing each other. Wait, could you really call either of those “normal”? Everything that had happened may have thrown my idea of “normal” out of whack.

“What happened?”

“We circled around back to the starting point.”

“No matter how many ice cream flavors they make, vanilla will never go out of style.”

File 18: Chef Koitarou's Insatiable Challenge

“Hey, grampa. I got that lady to do an authentic ‘nandeyanen’^[1].”

“I see. I see. Did you make sure to thank her?”

“...Nandeyanen.”

“Ha ha ha. You got your grandfather!”

“Yanen yanen!”

The pair who seemed to be grandfather and granddaughter (it would have seemed creepy if they weren’t) left the sushi shop with a smile. ...Was a Kansai dialect really that rare a thing?

They had been the last of the lunchtime customers, so the sushi shop now contained only myself and the stubborn old sushi chef. The stubborn old man gave me an annoyed look as I stood there with a lab coat worn over a cheap suit.

“I admire your politeness for waiting until the last customer left, but nothing else.”

“Then can we get down to business?”

I placed a business tablet computer down on the counter and the old man’s eyebrows lowered in suspicion almost immediately.

His face seemed to say that he hated me and my lab coat that smelled of ethanol.

Well, those who made incredible advancements along a certain path would always be in conflict with those who did not understand and who refused to head down that path.

Surprisingly few people had the abnormal determination needed to get the general public to accept you the way Koitarou-san had. And yet it was always

that determination that allowed this small nation to advance the way it had.

“I’m sure you know that I loathe the likes of you,” he said. “Yours is one of the biggest rotating sushi chains around. What I hate most of all is that you have the gall to put ‘Edo-style’ on your signs.”

“Oh, come on now. Edo-style merely refers to the form. It isn’t called Edo-style because someone from Tokyo made it. It’s the same as how Japanese chefs can make French food.”

“The form of food changes daily. Pizza started to be delivered by bike and sushi started to rotate on conveyer belts. But Edo-style refers to this. Everything that goes into this shop is what makes it Edo-style. I’m not complaining about whether the shop is located in Osaka or Tokyo. What I don’t like is your method of sticking a dropper into a test tube to look into the makeup of the flavor or the effects of preservatives, you food development researcher.”

“You say that, but sushi was originally a method of preserving fish. It was a type of fermented food. Trout sushi and the like were developed from that. When Edo-style sushi first showed up, it was treated as an inferior imitation just the way you are treating rotating sushi, was it not? Koitarou-san, I believe it was your ancestors who skillfully worked long months and years to raise it to the accepted position it is in now.”

“That may be, but I draw the line at calling that ‘Edo-style’. I don’t care what you do, but there needs to be distinction. Quit calling it ‘authentic’ or ‘Edo-style’ and then work to see if you can outdo real Edo-style under its own name.”

“Koitarou-san, do you like salmon or cheese rolls?”

“If you can outdo quality tuna with that, then I will not complain. I would prefer to have you challenge me with something new rather than by taking cheap tuna and trying to hide the flavor by adding lard.”

From that exchange, I am sure you have seen just how stubborn Koitarou-san could be.

And how softhearted he could be.

At first glance, he looked like a formidable enemy who was armed with his ideas, but when you broke through his ideas, he was often softhearted enough

to be unable to abandon others.

For example, he was the type of old man who would complain about a festival but at the same time create a lavish assortment of chirashizushi for the occasion. And he would tell the neighborhood children that their smiles were enough to pay for their sushi.

“But, Koitarou-san, we are running a business, so I did not come here for something I do not think has a chance of succeeding.”

“Are you going to use your tears in an attempt to get me to develop a product for you?”

“Something like that. After all, Koitarou-san, you may have complained about the last job I brought you, but you still helped me through to the end.”

“...That was because you said you wanted to develop sushi that was just like the real thing but could be eaten by those with fish allergies. You asked me to mix together things like soybeans and potato starch to perfectly recreate the flavor and texture.”

“Yes, yes. We may just be a rotating sushi restaurant, but we managed to take over a large portion of the medical care indus-...Cough, cough. No, I mean we managed to let many patients eat sushi with a smile for the first time.”

I had to quickly change what I was saying because Koitarou-san was glaring at me with eyes sharper than his knife.

“In other words, Koitarou-san, you are willing to swallow your personal pride and join forces with a chain restaurant like us if it will help the world at large, correct?”

“...Wait. So what is at stake today?”

“World peace. Or to be more specific, demonic beasts. Do you understand now?”

Koitarou-san’s gaze grew even sharper.

Well, you could hardly blame him.

For those creatures, the path of evolution had become so twisted that they had overturned all common biological knowledge. In fact, it made them almost

seem like they had come from “somewhere else”. They did not understand human language and all methods of communicating our thoughts to them had been ineffective. Also, they were overwhelmingly strong. The militaries of the 8 major countries of the world had quickly given up trying to suppress them, and now civilian groups were in control of making sure they were provoked as little as possible.

Due to those horrible creatures, calculations had predicted that humanity’s destruction would likely come from them rather than due to oil sources drying up or global warming causing food shortages. Naturally, the demonic beasts could only see humans as another food source.

“What is a single sushi chef supposed to do about it? Are you telling me to slice them up and place them above some sushi rice?”

“No. We humans cannot kill these demonic beasts in the first place. The most we can do is cause slight injuries that only drive them into a frenzy. That is why we must stop thinking offensively with ideas of how to ‘defeat’ them. That is why I have turned it on its head. That is the only way.”

“Ahn?”

“Demonic beasts view humans as food. But that does not mean they eat only humans. ...That makes this simple. If we give them some kind of food that is more delicious than humans and make sure they instinctually realize that they can only continue eating that food as long as we remain alive, they will no longer view us as targets.”

“Will it really work quite that well?”

“It’s similar to the symbiotic relationship between ants and aphids. Neither side is truly in control. Also, it does not require a mutual language. As long as we can teach them via experience that they will receive ‘delicious honey’ from us, we will be on equal footing.”

I had already tried this with a French chef and a Chinese chef, but they had said this method could be used for more than just world peace. After all, if the actions of the demonic beasts could be influenced by delicious food, it was possible that food could be used to make them attack other areas of the world.

However, that would just make things more difficult with this stubborn old man, so I decided to not bring it up.

A “villain focused on profit” like me could keep those difficult issues to herself.

“Koitarou-san, I won’t bother you with the specific numbers, but the casualties due to demonic beasts are worst in central Africa. That area has little resources and food, so the international community pays little attention to it. Due to this, help to evacuate the people is tending to arrive too late. I may have done a lot just to make money in the past, but this much is true. ...With my knowledge and your skill, we can bring the number of victims down to zero.”

“...Tch.”

Koitarou-san stopped in the middle of wiping down the kitchen with a wet rag.

“You’re as cowardly as ever.”

“And you are a true artisan for being willing to apply your talents despite that, Koitarou-san.”

And so Koitarou-san and I began the challenge.

In our attempt to face the threat of the demonic beasts, Koitarou-san used the senses of his tongue and his fingertips while I used the detailed statistics made from the massive amounts of data taken.

“If we need to make enough to feed all of them, it should be something that is not too difficult to make. Something the local people can simply and quickly make in large quantities would be best. Also, we can’t have the humans starving because they have no food left after feeding the demonic beasts. Ideally, it would be some fish or produce that is not often used for food.”

“It seems the demonic beasts’ sense of taste is not much different from that of us humans, but the reports say their ability to taste sourness is quite dull.”

“In that case, something like Nomura’s jellyfish might be a good idea. Really, anything that is large and emits a horrible ammonia smell. Their numbers have exploded recently, so quantity won’t be an issue.”

“I’ll have some brought in from our fish tanks.”

“...Do you have an aquarium built beneath your company?”

While we waited for the truck to arrive, we exchanged our opinions on the issue. The discussion was something like an exchange between two different cultures and it really inspired us. It was strange how our opinions were so different despite the fact that we were both trying to reach the same type of flavor.

When the Nomura’s jellyfish actually arrived, Koitarou-san frowned slightly and reluctantly looked over toward his knife.

“If you don’t want to get the horrible smell all over the place, I can prepare a kitchen and tools for you.”

“No, this is my cooking. I’ll use my tools.”

“So what should we do to make this jellyfish delicious while imagining that the sourness isn’t there?”

“It’s a collection of moisture, so putting it over a flame will flatten it. We have no choice but to use it raw.”

“So a type of sashimi?”

“Or we could increase the amount and make something like chirashizushi. But then we’d have to look for some other usually unusable food to take the place of the rice.”

Afterwards, we gathered things like weeds that were spreading too much and reducing the tubers of potatoes in the desert and safe fruits that were avoided because they looked just like poisonous ones.

“...We could probably make a salad with all this.”

“After all that talk about Edo-style sushi, we’re going to end up with something like that?”

“Actually, I think we should stick with the jellyfish. If we gather too many things that aren’t normally eaten, some bitterness will probably remain.”

“Hiding obstinate flavors is traditionally done by using wasabi soy sauce.”

“Wah! Wait, wait! Demonic beasts can’t handle anything spicy. The data says it causes them to go on a rampage! There was a report of horrible results when someone tried feeding them Indian food!!”

“Tch. Then we can put in something like pickled ginger to distract from the flavor...”

“I told you they can’t taste sourness.”

“Then what am I supposed to do!? Do the demonic beasts have a sweet tooth, so we should give them ice cream!?”

“Hmm...”

I operated the tablet computer with my index finger.

“I said the demonic beasts had a dull sense of sourness, right? It seems that’s because their digestive system is powerful enough that they can ignore that kind of warning signal.”

“Meaning?”

“It seems they often show up in trash dumps. I think they might love rotten foods.”

“Are you trying to mock me? As a sushi chef, freshness is my life.”

“Think of it as a fermented food. You can manage if you think of it as no different from cheese or natto, right?”

“I don’t care!! If they love the smell of rotting so much, why don’t you feed them a rag soaked in milk!? No, wait. That would be a waste of milk. But you could use sheep’s milk that humans almost never drink!!”

Later, Koitarou’s idea of the “Japanese Twist Stick” saved central Africa from its crisis and became a light of hope against the demonic beasts.

The major Japanese rotating sushi chain that held the patent profited immensely and grew to being the 2nd largest chain restaurant in the world. Koitarou was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize, but he stubbornly refused it. His name was known around the world as a representative of the stubborn

Japanese dandy, a personality type that had survived into the 21st century.

“Ahh, how wonderful. The world is at peace and my company has now delved deeply into the national defense and munitions industries. Koitarou-san, that was quite the horrible act you put on while refusing the Nobel Prize!! Huh? You look upset. Did something happen?”

“Yours is now the best-selling Edo-style sushi in the world. I think I’ve seriously lost all confidence in myself...”

File 19: A Unification of Standards is Urgent Business

It was the middle of the night, but my cell phone was ringing.

I heard my little brother's sleepy voice coming from the bottom bunk of the bunk bed.

"Onee-chan. Your phone is ringing."

"So is yours. What is this? Another mystery villain warning?"

"You're a magical girl, right, onee-chan? Can't you do something about... mumble mumble."

"I'm in charge of mystical beasts, those animals taken over by dark energy. Mystery villains are your thing, right? Hurry up and pull the string on the security buzzer to call in that bike rider."

If I removed my nightcap and changed out of my pajamas and into my outside clothes I had prepared for emergencies, I would feel I had lost. I brought the covers back over my head on the top bunk.

When I did, I heard a rumbling coming from a great distance. It was not like an earthquake. Vibrations at regular intervals shook our cheap house.

"Onee-chan."

"Demons that have turned giant are for that group of five people in tights to handle! Argh! Why don't they take their combining robot with them whenever they leave their secret base!? In fact, why don't they have it combined from the get-go!?"

More than one kind of evil was running rampant in this world and they all had their own distinct weaknesses. A single large organization like the police or the army could not deal with all of them.

Just like the police were skilled at handling criminals, magical girls were skilled at handling mystical beasts, bike riders were skilled at handling mystery villains, and groups of five people in tights were skilled at handling demons.

A unification of standards had been achieved to a certain extent, but that was as far as it went.

Since the reports sent to your cell phone came from various different organizations, your phone had a way of ringing all day long.

I looked over toward the window from which moonlight filled the room and I spotted someone landing on the balcony railing. The suspicious person looked like they were about to open the window and come in, so I took the initiative and spoke to them.

“...What are you doing? This is Japan. We don’t need you western people in tights.”

“Sorry, but our problem has already grown to a global scale. This is no time for you to be keeping up your isolationism.”

“Onee-chan. I got a warning email from overseas.”

“Don’t click it! Don’t do anything while you don’t know if you’ll get any service charges for this!!”

I had no choice but to call up the online cell phone manual and check to see if that would warrant a service charge.

Meanwhile, I recalled I had an English quiz the next day.

“You, magical girl of Cool Japan.”

“What is it, American comics macho?”

“It seems a giant robot pal of yours has started a war of independence up in orbit.”

“Eh? I thought that robot fell under the category of transformation heroes?”

“A boy who had lived a completely normal life up until yesterday somehow ended up inside a humanoid one and it activated never before seen functions, but I suppose it could be mistaken for the largest one belonging to that group in

tights.”

“Well, if you look at it from the outside, you really can’t tell who’s inside.”

“Speaking of which, it baffles me how you magical girls keep your identities hidden. Your faces are fully visible.”

“We manage somehow or other using the magical power of love. Anyway, what’s going on with that robot battle?”

The western man in tights looked up into the night sky.

“The ones who cannot resist any longer look like they are about to rain down on the earth. These robots falls under the jurisdiction of the Japanese government, so I wonder how they will handle this.”

“Can’t they keep this up in space!?”

“I would like to know why the people from this country who deal with space seem to take every opportunity to try to drop giant things on the earth from space.”

I don’t know why he was asking me. I was a magical girl. I lightly struck my bed and the representative of boys, my little brother, opened his mouth sleepily in the bottom bunk.

“Fnyahh. It’s because they have dreams...”

“Hm. Perhaps it is like a skinny kid wanting to show up the football captain.”

While he was feeling admiration for some western concept, new warning emails started arriving at our cell phone, making them ring and ring and ring.

“Shut up... Can’t you do something about that?”

“They’re emergency warnings, so we can’t just stop them.”

“Yes, but can’t we unify everything so it’s all settled with just one warning?”

“What are you saying? People in tights and magical girls have their own separate places to shine. You can’t ask us to simply resolve everything in our 30 minute broadcasts.”

“Well, yes. But maybe it wouldn’t be a bad idea to do crossovers occasionally.”

“Sorry, but I have not fallen so far as to embrace a little girl like you.”

“Now you’ve said it!! I’ll show you why Japan’s magical girls are such a steady source of income for the toy companies!!”

“Fgyaahhh!! Just let me sleep. I’m gonna call the bike guy!!”

It seemed my little brother in the bottom bunk had pulled the string on the security buzzer. The cell phones were bad enough, but now another annoying electronic tone added to the din.

I heard the front door break down, someone climb the stairs, and then the room to our bedroom was smashed through. A Japanese-style man in tights riding a giant bike entered the room.

I instinctually grabbed my magic wand.

“That engine is the most annoying sound of all!! Get with the times and use an electric engine!!”

“This is no time for that!! Things have gotten bad outside!!”

“I thought you were in charge of the villains in tights from this country?” asked the western man in tights.

However, it seemed that was not what the bike rider was trying to say.

“My mystery villains, her mystical beasts, and the group of five’s demons have started a joint venture with the robot army trying to win independence from earth!!”

“A joint venture!?”

“Also, they have pressured the EU into judging Souma Industries under antitrust laws. That’s the major defense company that develops and supplies us with our equipment. At this rate, they might be charged with an additional tax of over ten billion euros and asked to disclose their technological information!! The group will collapse!!”

“Geh! My toy company falls under Souma Industries, doesn’t it!?”

“You can still manage! What am I supposed to do about my bike!?”

“Oh, dear. Japan really does have a poor view of national defense. If you ask

me, you need to keep in mind that, when it comes to military development, corporations are more than just corporations. That way, things cannot be so easily-..."

"American comics boy. The major firearms company that is your primary sponsor just had to recall 2 million units. I'm sure they'll do something about it, but their stock has tanked. Is that movie of yours actually going to happen?"

"Fwoooooooooooooooooohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

The man in tights's cry echoed into the night.

However, a magical girl or someone in tights could do nothing about these business issues. Just like the police were skilled at handling criminals and poor at handling mysterious villains, transforming heroes like us had no way of attacking problems like stock prices or a worldwide recession.

Just as the heroes who protect the world fell silent and were wondering what to do...

...the door to the room burst open.

Standing there was the seedy-looking central pillar of my family. He had glasses, a comb-over, and a worn-out suit, but he tightened his tie with focused strength.

That 45 year old man who had been seemingly forever been a section chief at a 2nd rate trading firm after graduation from a 3rd rate university spoke.

"Papa is about to head out to fight, so don't worry about a thing. Just go back to sleep."

Heroes were surprisingly commonplace.

Every day, people were fighting battles of life or death in their field of expertise.

File 20: All Sorts of Offerings

When I returned from the school social studies field trip to Kyoto, I found a strange girl in my room.

She looked very Japanese.

However, she looked somehow more extravagant than a simple shrine maiden.

“Ah!! I can’t believe you! She was telling the truth. You have me, so how can you come home smelling of some other women as if nothing happened!?”

“...Um, who are you?”

“Sakuya! Konohana Sakuya-hime!! I won’t let you say you didn’t know I am worshiped at the neighborhood shrine!! You pray to me during your New Year’s shrine visit each year, and it was due to my divine protection that you passed your middle school entrance exams!! And yet...And yet...Wahh!! I can’t believe one of my precious worshippers was seduced by some woman he met on a trip!! I’ve been NTRed!!”

She seemed to be saying some horrible things about me, but it also seemed she was a goddess. A Japanese goddess. But what was this about me cheating on her?

“Don’t you dare say you don’t know what I’m talking about!! You have the stink of the divine protection of another goddess all over you!!”

“Divine protection?”

“Yes, divine protection!! You went around to various Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples while sightseeing in Kyoto, didn’t you!? And you threw tons of coins into all their offering boxes!! I-I’ve been betrayed... You already had a goddess like me, and yet you still went around collecting divine protection from all sorts of other goddesses!! I can’t believe you!!”

As Konohana Sakuya-hime (a goddess) wailed, she kept violently brushing at my shoulders and chest. It looked something like she was trying to brush off the pollen from early spring. Perhaps she was trying to get the “smell” off of me.

But if offerings were not allowed, did that mean...?

“Um.”

“What!?”

“By any chance, was I not supposed to buy charms either?”

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhh!! Stinking of another goddess’s divine protection was bad enough, but you have an a-a-accessory...!?”

“I thought it would make a good Kyoto souvenir.”

“They have safer things like yatsunashi!! By the way, I prefer it raw!!”

“Here.”

I held out a pale box toward the strange goddess. That seemed to put Konohana Sakuya-hime into a bit of a better mood. She seemed to view it as an offering.

As the goddess munched on the Japanese confectionary, she said, “Honestly, thinking you ‘might as well’ buy a charm while at a shrine is just ridiculous. Those things distort the path of your life using the divine protection of the shrine’s god. If you buy one without a clear objective in mind, you will end up derailing from the path you are on.”

“Isn’t it best to have as much good fortune as possible?”

“You fool. You can stray from the proper path by having things go too well. The tragic fate of a man who wins the lottery is a common story. The Japanese have an unfortunate habit of only relying on gods when they are in trouble, but that is the proper way of thinking when it comes to these types of goods. During entrance exam season, you buy an academic charm. When job hunting, you buy a business charm. And if you accidentally get your girlfriend pregnant, you buy a charm for an easy birth. The proper role for charms is to give a boost of good fortune during those occasional times of need. They are not something you can just buy willy-nilly and use as a cell phone strap.”

“Oh, I see.”

“And so I will be confiscating that charm!! This really pisses me off. I just can’t forgive you for covering yourself with the stink of another goddess’s divine protection!!”

The goddess grabbed the charm from my hand, let out a cry of anger, and threw it into a corner of the room.

But then the charm started to glow.

“The jealousy of a goddess is a horrible sight to see. You are going to cause unnecessary disasters, so stop it,” said a new voice.

With a sticky noise, a woman’s arm suddenly came out of the charm that was too small to even hold a cell phone. In no time at all, a shoulder, a face, and an entire upper body followed. After a few seconds, an entire goddess had come out.

Konohana Sakuya-hime clicked her tongue.

“So there you are, you thief!!”

“I would prefer you call me Kushinada-hime. And you are being too intolerant. Don’t get so upset just because he threw a bit of change into some offering boxes while on a trip.”

“This worshipper has always been the type to just go along with the flow, so I need to stop him while I can! He just throws his change into the collection box next to the convenience store register!!”

I raised my hand and asked a question.

“I have a question. Aren’t offering boxes and collection boxes completely different things?”

“The child aid institution the collection money goes to is a branch of a Buddhist organization. So if you take a wider view of things, it is a type of offering.”

“I also think it gets some kind of a tax break for being a religious organization. But regardless, I get the feeling that Konohana Sakuya-hime’s reaction is something like an allergic reaction...”

“What!? Then what if I told you this worshipper always throws some change into a fountain whenever he sees one!?”

“That would make him guilty.”

That makes me guilty? ...But why was it that people felt an urge to throw coins into water?

“So why are you here Kushinada-hime-san?”

“The ‘hime’ means princess, so it is enough to show respect. You do not need to add the ‘-san’. That is like referring to your teacher as ‘sensei-san’.”

“Okay, Kushinada-hime.”

“Kyaahh!! He said my name without an honorific☆”

“Damn yoooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!!” shouted an enraged Konohana Sakuya-hime.

Had I been tricked?

Konohana Sakuya-hime pointed at Kushinada-hime.

“You came here to say he’s yours, didn’t you!? While I was gone for Kannazuki, you shamelessly swooped in to steal him! I hurried back after hearing some strange bragging in the Izumo Kingdom, and this is what I find!?”

“Just so. And brushing off my worshipper’s shoulders is not going to get rid of my divine protection. Heh heh heh.”

“He is not your worshipper!! He is mine!!”

The clamor must have grown too loud because I heard the sound of a window on the house next door opening. My childhood friend Tanaka-san, a girl who went to a different school than me, stuck her head out.

“Hey, keep it down. And where’s that raw yatsunashi you promised me?”

“A goddess is eating it.”

I pointed over and Tanaka-san’s eyes widened in surprise.

“You brought two strange goddesses back with you!? Don’t you dare say those are souvenirs of your trip!!”

Meanwhile, the goddesses bristled.

“Someone who belongs to an Inugami!? Don’t tell me you plan to oppose a true god with someone like that, dog!!”

“I believe an Inugami is more like a Youkai than a god.”

“Inugami? What are you talking about?”

I had a vague recollection of Tanaka-san owning a clever golden retriever of unknown age named Jason-kun. Were they referring to that?

“...At this rate, I wouldn’t be surprised if a Tsukumogami showed up, too.”

“Those anthropomorphized types are troublesome. They make quite an impact with their characterizations.”

The two goddesses began to grow cautious, but something quite different from their fears occurred.

Suddenly, a girl with brown skin and dressed like a risqué dancer burst through the door without knocking.

“Hello. I am Lakshmi-chan from India.”

“Don’t just cross the ocean out of the blue!! We were trying pretty hard to set up a Japanese world here!!”

“Eh!? When do I get a turn!?” shouted Tanaka-san, but with everything else going on, no one was paying any attention to her.

“Heh. The syncretism of Shinto and Buddhism has led to the two being jumbled together and Buddhism and Hinduism have become quite jumbled together in India, so there is a connection. And I fit perfectly into the Japanese category due to Kisshouten of the Seven Gods of Fortune.”

“Tch!! So you’re a goddess of fortune and you show off a lot of skin! This is bad timing for such a formidable goddess to show up!!”

“This new character sounds like she is straight out of a light novel that is pandering for sales after having tried and failed to tell a serious story.”

But why had Lakshmi-san (a goddess) crossed the ocean to come to my house?

When I asked, Lakshmi-san (a goddess of fortune) smiled and said, “Well, worshipper...”

“He’s my worshipper!! Don’t you call him that!!”

“I have come to bring you misfortune.”

“Oh, I thought you were a goddess of fortune.”

“My little sister Kokuanten is a goddess that takes away fortune, but she was of no use because she just fidgeted around and was too embarrassed to appear before you. I think she might have fallen for you. And so I have been put in charge of giving and taking away fortune when it comes to you, worshipper. To be blunt, you’re taking too many goddesses for yourself☆ If something isn’t done, you could end up standing at the peak of humanity and turning the earth’s population of 7 billion into a single unified people. That is why I am here to stop you.”

“You say that, but you’re simply planning to have you and your sister surround my worshipper in the name of constant surveillance, aren’t you?”

“Of course. Goddesses get horny, too☆”

“Damn you!! Don’t say that with such a big grin on your face!!”

“Hee hee. Oh, worshipper. Have you ever wanted to sleep with two sisters at the same time?”

“Don’t let her trick you!! Kokuanten may be a little sister character, but she is famous for being peerlessly ugly!!”

No.

Um.

I had a question about something else.

“Kushinada-hime, you came to my house because I gave an offering at your shrine, right?”

“There was the charm as well.”

“And Konohana Sakuya-hime, for you it was the offerings I gave every year during my New Year’s shrine visit, right?”

“Don’t forget that this land is under my jurisdiction!!”

“Tanaka-san, what is your reason?”

“Eh!? M-my reason!?”

Through the window, I could see Tanaka-san hesitantly trying to figure out what to do in the neighboring house, but her golden retriever, Jason-kun, held up a placard saying, “An Inugami works to acquire that which his master desires, and that is you in this case.”

“Lastly, Lakshmi-san, you came to deal with my fortune, right?”

“Yes.”

“So...um...”

“What? Is something bothering you?”

Well...

I would be lying if I said no.

“Y’see, I went to a lot of different Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples while sightseeing in Kyoto.”

“What about it?”

“If I gave offerings at all those shrines and not just at Kushinada-hime’s, is every single one of those goddesses going to come to my house?”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“Umm...” said Lakshmi-san as if it had nothing to do with her. “Kannazuki is about to end and then all the gods of Japan are scheduled to return to their respective lands from the Izumo Kingdom. So are all of the gods of this country really going to be coming back then?”

I started hearing a great noise as if from a large crowd shouting outside.

The noise seemed to be gradually drawing nearer.

Konohana Sakuya-him and Kushinada-hime exchanged a glance and spoke.

“...This is war.”

“Yes. A war has begun.”

File 21: Let's Think Up a Romantic Language of Flowers Meaning

Using all the many features of a cutting edge smartphone, I was using 200% of my focus to surreptitiously lift up the skirt of the maid napping on the screen. But then an underclassman (female) of mine suddenly spoke up from behind me.

“Senpai, it’s an emergency!! The library has turned into a botanical garden!!”

“G-gahh!! N-no! You’ve got it all wrong! The code to stop the giant ultimate weapon Assault Noah is written on the underside of her skirt, so I have a perfectly gentlemanly and world-peace-related reason for doing this! I didn’t have any kind ulterior-...Wait, what?”

“Again, the university library has turned into a botanical garden! ...Also, what were you crouched over and grinning about?”

As I did not want her looking any further into that, I quickly headed to the building in question.

And it was exactly as she said.

“Oh, my. ...This certainly is something.”

As my underclassman had said, the university library had undergone a class change to botanical garden.

And the plant inside it was not a normal one.

“Shit! What the hell is this!? It looks like it could swallow a human whole!”

“W-wait, senpai! They’re something like really, really big carnivorous plants. If they don’t get enough nutrients from the ground, it seems they will target any living thing that gets near them!!”

My underclassman was the type who would look good in buruma, but was actually a bike shorts girl. I looked in the direction she was pointing and saw a great number of containers filled with nutrients stabbed into giant flowerpots. I did not like being around those kinds of chemicals.

The library was a modern type of building so its walls were almost entirely made of glass, so the plants could receive plenty of sun. (Out of fears of the sun damaging the paper of the books, each and every one had a UV book cover placed on it, but I was unsure how effective that would be.) The plant's giant leaves looked unnecessarily energetic like they were from some tropical island.

"So what is this?"

"It was them again. This was yet another left-over gift for the exceptional geology department."

"Why do they always stand out the most at our university? Most of the budget goes to them and they get the top facilities."

"The professors from other departments have even appeared on TV in an attempt to do something about it, so we've become something like an office for TV personalities."

"So what is this thing?"

"You know about the uproar around the Vosne Asteroid, right? It seems some aliens from outside the solar system have established some technology on it to carry things. Previously, communications were primarily done via data carried by electric signals, but now an 80 year trade route has been established."

"Hehh... But doesn't the side receiving the objects have to risk their lives? They have to carry out the work to take on the objects while matching the asteroid's incredible speed."

"What's worse is what the aliens get out of this! They're having the asteroid snatch up debris along its path to take back to them!! They're gonna steal Earth's technology!!"

"Yeah, but the debris around the earth is at its saturation point, so they were saying it would probably start having a negative effect on the space industry before long. So shouldn't we be celebrating the fact that they're taking some of

it away?”

“You’re too naïve, senpai! It may just be trash to us earthlings, but it might be the final missing piece the aliens need to complete some horrible technology!!”

“Anyway, what is this thing?”

“There was a special sale on mackerel pike at the neighborhood supermarket, so...”

“What is it? What is it? What is it!? What! Is! It!?”

My underclassman did not like the dust that flew into the air as I thrashed about, so she finally gave me a proper answer.

“Apparently, it’s a present from the aliens.”

“And why is it in the library? Normally, this kind of thing would be sent to a sealed room for the exceptional geology department.”

“Our university’s research team got their hands on it first, but they came across a problem.”

“...We’re from the literature club. How could we possibly be involved?”

“It’s a plant, so it needs a language of flowers meaning.”

“...”

Eh?

But before I could express my confusion, my underclassman scratched her cheek softly with her index finger.

“I reacted the same way when they first told me. But apparently it’s true.”

“But...” I looked back and forth between the bike shorts girl and the giant carnivorous plants. “Can we really just give it one so easily?”

“It seems the language of flowers isn’t something decided on by any set group. I’m not too knowledgeable about it myself, but it seems different countries and cultures have different meanings for the same flowers. They want to come up with something even if it’s only for this university, but the exceptional geology department has no naming sense whatsoever, so they threw in the towel.”

“I see. This certainly is an inexact thing, isn’t it?”

“I want to get this thing out of the library as quickly as possible, so let’s just give it some meaning.”

“Good point. ...Hmm, it’s a giant carnivorous plant, right? How about ‘that which devours flesh’ or...vofowaahh!?”

“Wahhh!! Senpai’s head is being eaten!!”

It did not seem to like that, so I was very nearly devoured myself.

“Wait, this flower can react!?”

“Let’s give it a romantic language of flowers meaning! I’m sure it’ll accept that!!”

“Y-yeah, but what could we possibly give to such an overwhelmingly grotesque flower? Something like ‘that which gathers flies with its stench’ or...mochuu!?”

“Senpai, you need some education!!”

The bike shorts girl pulled a book on the language of flowers from a shelf filled with illustrated reference books.

“See? It’s filled with schmaltzy words like ‘I love you’ or ‘I swear eternity to you’!! It probably wants you to give it something like that!”

“Y-you like the love romance genre, so wouldn’t this be a job for you?”

“Oh, c’mon! What are you saying!?”

“Idiot! Don’t swing that giant book arou-...gbeffh!?”

As anything more would put my life at risk, I had no choice but to pull some loose leaf paper and a mechanical pencil out of my bag. These meanings were generally a single idea. And they had to be as maudlin as possible. Also, this one had to be symbolic of that monstrous flower.

“...H-how about ‘flawless perfection’!? Dobyarjaaa!?”

“You can’t go with any obvious lies, senpai!!”

“Bhuh... Th-then what am I supposed to do!? I have to base it on this thing!!

I'm never going to find a beautiful meaning for thi-...nchrwaaa!!"

"It seems to be telling you to choose something, senpai!!"

"Well, I could go down a more realistic path and choose something like 'you're ugly but I love you'...gyagyavaaaaa!!"

"I think it wants something nicer than that, senpai!!"

"Your unaffectedness lets your true beauty show throu...byaaahhh!?"

"That was too nice, senpai!!"

"Bubyargyaaahhh!!"

"Senpai!!"

"...!!"

"!?"

An old man in a lab coat from the exceptional geology department came to retrieve the giant carnivorous plants.

"So what did you decide on for its language of flowers meaning?"

"Pant, pant... 'View me as I am'."

File 22: The World's Most Enjoyable Lesson?

The aproned beauty and the shoddily-made puppet were all smiles as usual!!

In a laboratory with all four walls colored a light blue, a young woman was leaning against a giant blackboard(-style screen made to display images on like the weather forecast).

“Hello. It’s time for another thrilling experiment with Kyoumi-oneesan and Spear-kun.”

“Hey, onee-san. Why does this show never get cancelled? Normally, this thing couldn’t be aired on a terrestrial broadcast and the number of complaints has exceeded 8000!!”

“Once it exceeds 10,000, let’s put together a special 2 hour episode. Also, this is a public educational show, so the opinions of the viewers don’t matter. Ratings only matter when you have ads bought by sponsors.”

“Don’t be stupid. Even public television is put together to draw in viewers!!”

The young woman ignored the overly energetic Spear-kun, and folded her arms needlessly just to push up her large breasts. She then blew a kiss at the camera.

“Okay, today’s theme is...tah dah! We will artificially create a micro big bang!! Boom boom boom boom pow pow pow pow!!”

“I can only call that a bad idea!! You can’t do that, onee-san! If you succeed, the entire galaxy will be blown away!!”

“Did you miss the word ‘micro’ at the start? We’ll be fine.”

“That isn’t the issue here!! This isn’t the JIS mark!! Actually are black holes and the like even okay!?”

“A big bang is actually quite simple to prepare. Here’s a piece of trivia. You

can cause a big bang with things you can find anywhere.”

“That’s scary!!”

“All you need is matter and antimatter. But I am not talking about quantum annihilation here. There is not much antimatter in this world, but it was all gathered when the big bang occurred. We need to do something about that first.”

As the young woman spoke, she displayed a simplified diagram on the blackboard-style screen.

Spear-kun the puppet trembled and said, “Y-you’re going to artificially produce some?”

“No, I will not be doing anything that annoying. Answer me this, Spear-kun. Where did the antimatter disappear to in the process of the universe being made?”

“I don’t know. Actually, I think you would get a Nobel Prize if you figured that out.”

“If there is enough antimatter to match all the matter in the universe, there must be enough of it to create an entire universe that is completely the opposite of ours.”

“You don’t mean...”

“So wouldn’t you think there is a parallel world-like universe made entirely of antimatter expanding somewhere out there, Spear-kun!? We do not have to forcibly produce antimatter just because we live in a world devoid of it! If we just open a slight hole in the world and call in some antimatter particles from the outside universe, a big bang will occur on its own. Yay!!”

“Wait, wait. I thought the idea of a world made up of only antimatter had been denied?”

“We’ll know once we try it.”

“Don’t be so quick to say that! Also, when you say ‘open a slight hole in the world’...”

“Okay, in preparation for creating a wormhole, I am now preparing a micro

black hole.”

“That wormhole alone is enough to win a Nobel Prize!! And I thought the EU had the monopoly on micro black holes!!”

“And that will be prepared using this!!”

Kyoumi-oneesan snapped her fingers and the four walls of the room fell down.

The visible area grew considerably.

What lay beyond was a grassy field as if on a farm.

“A large particle accelerator! Most of it is below ground, so it may be a bit hard to tell it’s there. The fully circular types are the most famous, but the track field-like capsule types actually provide more acceleration in the end. But it’s best to switch paths like train tracks☆”

“No one can follow what is going on, onee-san!! How did you prepare this!?”

“Eh? The word particle accelerator may make it sound complicated, but the principle behind it is quite simple. The real problem is in scale and accuracy, but if you ignore the safety side of things, you can gradually build one in a piece of reclaimed land with the junk you find laying around.”

“Waahhh!! Don’t explain that!!”

The young woman held back the puppet with a hand as it tried to jump at her. She never stopped smiling.

“And this is the micro black hole we have created. Technically, a micro black hole only appears for a few hundredths of a second, so it is merely being kept in a state where a micro black hole can be created at any time. It’s something like the surface tension holding the water in an overly filled cup.”

“Don’t talk about this like you’re building a bookcase on the weekend!!”

“Yes, yes. The black hole we have created has been adjusted so that, if there is really a world of matter and a world of antimatter, it will become a point linking the two. I suppose it is similar to the narrow point at the middle of an hourglass. It will absorb matter and antimatter from both sides and create a high temperature state where everything is condensed in one point just like at

the time of the big bang!”

As the puppet listened to the flowing explanation, it looked up as if it had suddenly realized something.

“H-huh? You mean a big bang really will occur if all goes well here?”

“It won’t be that simple. We have merely opened a wormhole to create a path to the universe made of only antimatter. What gathers in the black hole from both worlds is up to luck. If everything necessary is not gathered, no big bang will occur.”

“Hm? The other side is an antimatter universe that is the complete opposite of this universe, right? That means...”

“Yes, that there can be as many different types of things over there as there are here in this universe.”

“Doesn’t that make this rather difficult? Wouldn’t we have to gather samples of every single substance in our universe and match them to the antimatter gathered one at a time? That’s worse than trying to brute force the code for a safe.”

“By the way, how many variations are there in the smallest units of things that make up our universe?”

“Eh? Aren’t there more than there are stars in the universe...?”

“Four! The strong force, the weak force, gravity, and electromagnetism.”

“The odds of getting it by trying everything just shot up!! Also, the basis of the physical world isn’t really the basis!? You can narrow it down that far!?”

“We are preparing the conditions for the big bang. That was in the beginning before things became more specialized. No complexity is needed.”

“Wait, does that mean that you are now going to try each of them until you cause a big bang? Wait, onee-san, wait!! This is not time to be worrying about ratings or the number of complaints!”

“Now, the only question remaining is whether the black hole has enough attraction to eliminate the explosion!”

“W-waaaaahhhhhh!!!!!”

“Ready, set, boom!!!!!”

After the taping of the show ended without delay, the staff member who controlled the puppet spoke while moving the mouth of the stuffed doll covering his hand.

“Is that all there is to a big bang?”

“I told it would be micro, right? It doesn’t stick around long enough to be visible to the naked eye. And one this small does not even escape the black hole, so not even measurement equipment can see it. People take the idea of having dreams too far when they say a black hole created in a large particle accelerator will destroy the planet.”

“But I still think we’re going to get complaints. They’ll be telling us not enough happened after all that buildup.”

“Sigh. The viewers really do rule us, don’t they?”

File 23: This Time the Ice Age is Real

This conversation occurred at the university job hunting center.

“No, I think you are mistaken about something. No company hires people based on their academic record anymore,” said the young female receptionist in a tone flatter than a business robot’s.

In my suit for interviews, I frantically said, “Wait, wait. Then what’s the point of this university?”

“Who knows. I think the only reason it’s still here is because the stubborn government workers refuse to revise the system. I don’t really know though. Your cell phone has a dictionary in it, right? With that, you can blend into society even if your knowledge of kanji is horribly insufficient.”

The receptionist did not seem very motivated as she sipped at some green tea in a teacup she held elegantly in both hands (but her face was coolly expressionless).

“I can speak four languages.”

“You can buy a smartphone live translation app for 4500 yen that can handle 20 languages. The phone handles speech and the camera handles text, so it can carry out excellent translations in real time. How long did it take you to learn four languages? Was the value of the time and effort you put into that less than 4500 yen?”

“Th-this certainly is a world of convenience we live in,” I said in desperation, but the receptionist merely nodded.

She started munching on a rice cracker she had left next to the counter for herself.

“It really is. The people creating these apps are likely simply hoping for a more convenient world, but as a result, they have created a society where every type

of talent and value can be easily spread throughout the population. Simply put, we have all become equal. Individuality has been lost. ...Humans are all together and all the same. But that has made hiring difficult. How are you supposed to choose an employee out of the new graduates who all look the same?"

"Well, if anyone's fine, can't they just hire me?"

"If anyone was fine, they would not need to hire new people in the first place, you idiot. It would be faster to simply have their current employees download a new app. Labor costs can be economized, too."

The hiring rate of college graduates was down to a horrifying 0.005 of what it used to be.

With the way society had changed, it was not too surprising. The real question was what had become of all those people who could not find a job.

"This reminds me of the robot riots."

"You mean when cheap artificial laborers were taking all the flesh-and-blood humans' jobs, so those who claimed they could not find a job rioted? Personally, I think they should have cursed the life they had lived that made them so undesirable rather than cursing those created puppets."

"But they did get the robot labor regulation law passed due to occupying the main road along Nagatacho for 2 months. Now that the number of robots a single company can own is limited, we are living in the age of humans. But if companies have a single employee use too many apps, they'll just collapse from overwork, right? So don't they need at least a few new workers?"

The receptionist looked as expressionless as any robot as she pulled a package of youkan out of a small refrigerator sitting at her feet (that she had brought in for herself).

"Paying reparations for overworking a single employee is cheaper than paying labor costs for hundreds of employees."

"...So human beings are treated like disposable gears?"

"The gears known as robots were driven out of society, so humans had to

take their place.”

The receptionist’s eyebrows actually twitched slightly as she had difficulty opening the youkan’s plastic packaging due to her neatly cut fingernails.

“Hm? But I thought the app problem was limited to intellectual work. What about physical labor?”

“That’s when that powered suit underneath your suit comes into play. It’s no different from a very effective app. You aren’t what companies need. It’s the equipment you wear. As long as people have that same equipment, it doesn’t matter who they are.”

“Gnhh!? B-but I have confidence in my health. I’m not talking about athletic ability here. If you want a stable source of physical labor, you need someone healthy...”

“Health management apps are all over the place thanks to that popular diet app from a few years ago that left everyone in bad shape. If you follow the graph in what you eat and how you exercise, anyone can become healthy.”

“Th-then what about artistic work...?”

“About 80% of artistic creation is done with the help of inspiration AI. Any kind of artistic or literary work is created by the balance and arrangement of AIs. To be honest, it is a vague and difficult to judge field, so I will give no further comment on it.”

“Wh-what about the world of things like shogi and chess?”

“Do I really need to explain this? I do not think a human brain is ever used in actual matches any more. Oh, but someone needs to use their fingers to move the pieces to where the composite AI indicates, so I suppose you could argue a human brain is needed from a purely technical standpoint. Maybe the day will come when only the spinal cord is needed.”

“S-so what *do* you need to get hired? What decides it?”

“Your ability to create a nice atmosphere?”

“...What?”

The receptionist finally managed to get the plastic off the youkan. She said

something I could not believe while bringing the cola-colored confectionery down for a soft landing on a small plate.

“Your humanity, your ability to create a character for yourself, your ability to read between the lines, your ability to cheer people up, your ability to get along with the community. I think it might be things like that.”

“Um...What are you talking about?”

The receptionist expressionlessly sliced the youkan using a plastic spatula. When I reached out to grab a piece, she mercilessly struck the back of my hand.

“The human ability to think, to calculate, and to carry out physical labor are supplemented by apps and machines, so it can’t be helped. What else do humans have left? If anyone can do the job, then why not invite those who are easy to get along with to the workplace?”

“What!? So the carefree people who made fun of the people taking the lectures seriously are the ones who do well in life!?”

“It’s because you view school as nothing more than a place to accumulate knowledge that people like you get so frantic when it comes time to find a job. I hope you have realized that this is no time to be prizing a breast-shaking app that uses gyro sensors. No matter how hard you shake it, the bikini straps will not come undone.”

“Ghh!? H-how do you know about that!? Where did you get that information!?”

“But the thing about job hunting is...”

She sipped at her green tea and ate some youkan, but she did not continue.

Was she giving her own enjoyment priority?

“What? What’s the thing about job hunting?”

“I mentioned before that it had to do with your humanity and ability to get along with other people, but how long will those be exclusively human things? Technology has developed quite a lot lately.”

“Y-you mean it is starting to give people the ability to make friends or lovers?”

“Con artist groups have put together detailed manuals on how to scam old people. They’re something like complex flowcharts. And TV producers have gathered detailed data on what makes people laugh or cry.”

“I-if they actually make apps like that, what will happen to us?”

“The day might be coming when the number of friends you have is determined by whether you download certain apps or not. Perhaps the same will determine the results of elections. Everyone looking down at a screen as they speak with their friends or lovers would be a strange sight indeed.”

“That’s not what I meant. I was asking what would happen to those of us trying to find a job.”

“Who knows.”

The young receptionist tilted her head cutely while still expressionless.

“Maybe it will just come down to luck. Or I suppose the day could come when you get a job based on whether you are attractive or not. Oh, but things like clothes and hairstyle could be handled by fashion apps, so it would simply be how attractive a face you have. By the way, are you the confident type?”

“...!?”

File 24: How to Defeat a Powerful Enemy That Does Not Exceed Human Understanding

The court academic laboratory may sound like a strange place where all the world's knowledge is gathered, but it was really a place that carried out any task the king or others from the royal court asked us to do.

We would have to do something about the exploding locust population that was putting the kingdom's crops in serious trouble, or do something about a mountain that seemed about to have a volcanic eruption. But there was one problem that was worrying the king more than anything else of late.

"Ugh, now this is something."

"Huh? What's the matter professor? Your cloak is all torn up."

I was the indoor type, so the mere fact that I was wearing a cloak should have been strange. I was so slender that it was often said I would look better in women's clothing than the girl who acted as my assistant. No matter how much training I went through, I could not seem to get even slightly muscular.

"Wild beasts. They're on the rise again."

"Eh? If you mean the hellhounds, we dealt with those last month."

My assistant must have had nothing of importance to do because she was performing an experiment to see what sweet juices would most effectively cause rhinoceros beetles to gather. She was mixing things like honey and melon juice in a flask. She now focused on me with a dropper in one hand.

"That's old news. The ones filling the fields now are trolls. Once their numbers pass a certain level, caravans start getting attacked left and right. The amount of food they need increases with their numbers, after all. The more of them there are, the more likely it is that caravans will be attacked and their cargo will

be stolen.”

“Then can’t we just keep the caravans from going through there? When the number of rabbits decreases, the number of lions automatically adjusts,” said my assistant while pouting her lips in displeasure.

She was a genius, but she was an utter failure at anything outside of her area of expertise.

“If the caravans cannot get through, the fortress city will cease to function. The humans will start dying from lack of food before the trolls do. By the way, I’m thirsty, so can I drink that?”

When I pointed toward the mystery flask, my assistant held it protectively between her hands (and chest) like a child.

“No, you cannot. Anyway, why do humans always cause problems in otherwise good plans?”

“Well, it is us humans who are always throwing off the balance of the food chain. And even if we did stop the caravans from coming through, there are enough trolls that they might just come to knock down the city walls. Like with all animals, they show no mercy when hungry.”

My assistant returned the flask to the table and asked me a question with a puzzled expression.

“Has the troll population really grown that much?”

“It has. That’s why the king has come to us about it.”

“So will we be doing what we always do?”

“Yes, yes. As always, we will begin by examining a corpse of the wild beast in question.”

I brought a large burlap sack in from the hallway and spread the contents out on the table. It was larger than a human and its muscles were much greater than a human’s. I was unsure if even a heavily armed knight would be able to defeat it in a straight fight.

“Did you kill it, professor?”

“If I had that kind of strength, I would not have a research job. Like with any beast that’s numbers have grown this much, bodies of ones that have died naturally are plentiful. Whether you can get one before decay sets in is up to luck though. Now then...”

The world at large did not look on us kindly for cutting apart corpses, but it was our job. We had to take it apart to do a thorough investigation.

However...

We were not trying to find the troll’s weak points or vital points to inform the knights.

With a wild beast population increasing at that rate, finding a way to defeat them one by one was not all that useful.

It was the same reason that weeds and roaches did not go extinct.

However, something had to be done about the exploding troll population.

And it was our job to figure out what that was.

“Trolls are generally considered to be completely useless. Their meat stinks and tastes horrible, and their bones grow brittle when dried out, so they cannot be used as weapons or for defense. There really is nothing beneficial about them.”

“What about their skin?”

“It grows mold easily, so it can’t be used either.”

“So they can’t be eaten and they can’t be used for any kind of offensive or defensive tools. This is quite a difficult problem.”

“There might be some special use we can make of them, but that won’t increase the amount of consumption. However, there is one thing that we know people will put in their mouths even if it is disgusting.”

My assistant gave a level-headed response to that.

She gave a bold smile while looking at the grotesque corpse.

“You mean...”

“That finding a piece of it that can function as a medicine will make an

excellent shortcut, yes.”

“Since this one died naturally and decay has set in, serious damage may have been done to the internal organs. Is there really anything worth looking into here?”

“We have to at least try.”

With a groan of effort, we “opened” the troll’s body using a psychedelic means that cannot be described in text. I am leaving out quite a bit of detail here, but you should really thank me for that. We then checked each individual piece inside.

“If we can’t find anything to make medicine out of, we should probably just give up.”

“If we find something that is bad for your health, that can be useful as well. In fact, substances in the natural world that cannot at all be used as either a poison or a medicine are quite rare.”

We took each individual piece of the troll’s “contents”, crushed them into a paste, boiled them, roasted them, and otherwise processed them. The processes used were the same as in cooking, but this was hardly a scene you could happily bring a child to see. However, we did find something interesting.

“I found a component in its liver that might work in a medicine meant to sober people up.”

“Its stomach acid is quite powerful. If we could stabilize it, it could be useful.”

“It doesn’t seem powerful enough to destroy an enemy’s equipment instantly, though.”

“It can be used for other things. It could probably be used to easily get treasure by putting some in the keyhole of a treasure chest. The inner portion of the lock is delicate. It could also function as a trap killer.”

“Could the stomach itself be used in some kind of medicine?”

“If some time passes after the troll’s death, the defensive membrane is destroyed, so that could be difficult. See, this one’s is already beginning to be destroyed bit by bit.”

Simply put, we were investigating to see if we could find any valid uses for a wild beast like the troll. It was the same as the ivory from elephants and the skins of tigers. As long as we found a use for them, they would no longer be considered mere wild beasts.

My assistant quickly wrote on a piece of parchment using a quill to calculate out the equivalent market value of each substance we discovered. If the sum of those values crossed a certain line, this would be a success.

“This looks like it will work out well. The total amount comes out to 10,000 platinum. The scale of risks and merits is clearly tilted in our direction.”

“By the way, remind me what we came up with for the hellhounds from last month.”

“Their skins and fangs. They are quite useful militarily, so they are quite popular with weapon shops and the knights.”

“I see. That’s a relief. These uses won’t be competing with them.”

Coming up with a use for Wild Beast A was difficult enough, but if it conflicted with the use for Wild Beast B, the future value of Wild Beast B would drop. Then the number of people attacking Wild Beast B would drop and Wild Beast B’s population would grow to dangerous levels again.

Oh.

I may have given the answer in that explanation.

“...It’s the same as tigers and elephants. The one is one of the strongest carnivorous beasts. The other is an herbivorous animal large enough to be used as a tank. However, people look at them in a different light when it comes to their skins or the ivory from their tusks. That is why they have been hunted to near extinction,” said my assistant as she used the quill to brush dust off of her clothes. “There are a limited number of knights, so if they are charged with exterminating wild beasts, they cannot hold neighboring kingdoms in check as well. So basically we just need to create a reason for the seemingly infinite masses to fight them.”

“It is us humans who are always throwing off the balance of the food chain.”

“But if they have the strength to do that, why don’t they just exterminate them in the first place?”

“That’s just how humans are. The way of the world is to pretend to be weak so you can enjoy receiving the services society provides. No one will ever think to risk their life when it doesn’t benefit them any. The people who do think that way are the ones who end up being knights or mercenaries.”

All that was left for us to do was to use the lives of the greedy masses to drive the troll population to the brink of extermination.

Whether the trolls actually went extinct or began being treated as “protected monsters” would be up to the king and the nobles. However, I doubted they would give them protected status. Mermaids and elves were one thing, but trolls were ugly.

“Human desire is a frightening thing.”

“But it is that desire that has allowed us to advance this far,” I said as I wrote our results in the form of an itemized list on a piece of parchment. “Plenty of other animals and monsters can speak and perform calculations. They can even be creative. I can think of only one reason why humans have risen so far above all those others.”

“And what is that?”

“The overwhelming variety of our desires. Compared to those others, ours are just off the charts.”

I did not think it would be a pure hero who would defeat the demon king army in the end. No matter how high your fixed parameters were, a human without desires would have no ambition. Simply put, they would level up much too slowly.

I found the masses who surrounded the hero and were always complaining and going along with each new fad to be much more frightening.

I found them more frightening than the hero and maybe even more than the demon king.

One month later, the court academic laboratory received an interim report.

“Professor! The troll population is continuing to grow! Instead of poaching or excessively hunting the trolls, the stupid masses are scattering food for them!!”

“Damn...”

“They have found it to be more efficient to have the trolls vomit up stomach acid while alive than to kill them and take it from their corpse. Also, the trolls’ livers regenerate quickly, so they can cut out a portion and then let them loose once more. The trolls will regenerate the missing portion in a surprisingly short time!! Wh-what do we do, professor!? The troll population is growing like crazy!! Don’t they know what will happen to the fortress city if the population keeps growing!?”

“Human desire really is the scariest thing of all.”

After Finishing the Survey

Okay, thank you.

I will now be taking up the surveys. Could you pass them up to the front?

Oh, you want to know what purpose this had?

Well, you can't change your answers now, so I guess I can tell you.

These short films featured many different characters. I think you have now ranked them according to their words and actions.

Did you think of it as rating the characters as you went through?

However...

This survey had one other reason.

Every one of you will have had felt different things about each character. That is clear just by looking at the numbers you have used to rank them on your surveys. A miraculous coincidence like ranking them in the exact same order as someone else is possible and it could also happen due to copying someone else's answers, but if you answered honestly, you should all have very scattered results.

But what do those scattered results mean?

You know the answer to that, don't you?

This is not an issue of personal tastes or what rouses your interests. Those things are only what is on the surface. Bring to your mind the order you gave the films in your survey. What did you like? What did you not like? An image of the personality that made those decisions to classify the short films should appear from the string of numbers.

That personality describes the character known as "you".

Now then.

What kind of character is the “you” that “you” have brought to the surface? If it is the type of character that could have enjoyably and attractively taken part in these short films without driving down their quality, you will surely live an enjoyable life. In fact, you have constructed a character that brings an enjoyable life to him or herself.

If not, well...don't worry.

These are merely the numbers “you” have given for the character known as “you”. Someone else is almost sure to rate “you” in a completely different way.

Yes.

Just like how everyone rates the short films of this survey differently.

Introduction to the Participants

“...up. Hey, wake up.”

“Gh...?”

A girl's sweet (but somewhat accented) voice stabbed into Anzai Kyouzuke's ears, so he raised his head. He felt a dull pain in his forehead where it had been pressing against the table.

(Where-...? Why am I in a university auditorium?)

As his half-asleep head began functioning, his consciousness finally came into focus with reality.

“Oh, right. I was taking some survey, and the professor went on talking too long...”

“Don't do that. You should listen to the very end.”

“?”

“It's like meeting a small baby at the coin locker and falling asleep before you can be told 'It's you!'.”

“I have no idea what you're talking about...”

Anzai looked around as he spoke.

That strange professor was no longer on the auditorium's large stage. In fact, most of the 20-30 people gathered for the survey were gone. It was just him, the girl who had woken him up, and three other girls gathered a bit away.

Anzai guessed the girls had stayed behind talking after the survey had ended.

“It must be dark outside by now,” said the blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl who had woken him. “We're about to leave, but what about you?”

“...What about locking up the building?”

“I don’t know. The professor who ran the survey would be in charge of that, right? He gave his speech and then left. Do you think we should speak with the old guy in the office?”

“I guess you’re right.” Anzai stood up and yawned. He grabbed his small bag that had bare minimum of school supplies inside. “We can just leave that to the professor. I wonder if the coffee shop is still open.”

“Oh, we were just talking about heading somewhere else.”

Then the three girls who were likely with the blonde girl called over toward them. Naturally, they were calling to the girl, not to Anzai.

The one who actually called out was a tall girl with long, glossy black hair. She was likely an upperclassman of Anzai’s as he had taken more than one year to get into the university.

“Harumi, are you still doing that?”

“Hotaru-san. He says he’ll go with us to the coffee shop.”

(I never said I would go...)

They were of course complete strangers, but Anzai had noticed that kind of spontaneous thing happening a lot more frequently once he entered the university. You would hang out with people out of the blue and just as quickly never see them again. In middle and high school, he had always eaten lunch with the same group.

The mood and atmosphere had caused some kind of chemical change to the situation, but he still felt an odd pressure in being so casually thrown into a group of girls. It was different from meeting someone new one on one.

A girl who looked more like a cabaret club girl than a college girl seemed to pick up on Anzai’s bewilderment and she smiled. When she spoke, her speech was more polite than her appearance would lead one to expect.

“See, Harumi? You always get too close to people.”

“Eh? What are you talking about, Aisu. I don’t have bad breath, so what is the problem?”

“Sorry. Harumi has very few emotional boundaries. She has no grasp of what

an appropriate emotional distance is. But do not think this means she has fallen for you. She is this way with everyone, so you will be in for a shock later if you get it in your head that she is treating you special.”

“You don’t have to worry about that.”

“Just making sure. She managed to get four different stalkers during her middle and high school years. And one of those was her school’s head teacher. That is an amazing high score, don’t you think?”

(Why do you have to compare me to some stalkers from her past...?)

Anzai didn’t know what to think about that, but he was not a straightforward enough person to just say it out loud.

He would not go so far as to say that the world was held together by lies, but he did view the truth as something like a bitter medicine. Those who did not wrap the truth in some sweetness would end up distanced from others due to that bitterness.

“Why is Kozue hiding behind you, Hotaru-san?” asked the girl named Harumi.

“She went to a girl’s school all through middle and high school, remember? She’s probably afraid of guys.”

“Quite the opposite actually. Kozue is the type to attack and then run away when she sees something that scares her. Since she is creating a safe area and carefully watching him, I would say she is quite interested in him.”

After having all that said about her, the girl named Kozue gave a short but distinct reply.

“That is not true.”

“You should be careful. Kozue is the opposite of Harumi. She is the type to start thinking someone is in love with her if he picks up an eraser she dropped.”

“That is not true.”

“In fact, even though we are all girls, she had quite an amazing misunderstanding during the first term.”

“That is not true.”

“Hey,” said Anzai to Kozue. “Why are you wearing those giant headphones? How can you hear us with those on?”

“That is her style of fashion,” cut in the girl with the long black hair who seemed to be named Hotaru. “The cord isn’t connected to anything. The bandages wrapped around her wrists and the ripped stocking on her right leg are the same. They look like they have some kind of meaning, but thinking about it is just a waste of time.”

“Hey, I told you she was dangerous! Look, she is looking over all wide-eyed because some stupid guy has taken an interest in her outfit!! If you do not run away too, Hotaru, you will fall victim to her razor as well!!”

“Th-that is not true!!”

“Hey, let’s go to the coffee shop already!”

At the unreliable-looking Harumi’s insistence, they left the auditorium. At some point, Anzai had become surrounded, so it was easier to just go along with them.

It happened with a rather arbitrary feeling.

It happened with a feeling of “Well, whatever”.

Anzai reflected on the fact that he had rarely experienced that kind of feeling in middle or high school. Back then, he had thought having to repeat a year would put hundreds of cracks into his life, so this was quite a change.

It was pitch black outside and the air was filled with a chilliness that had not been present at the time of the afternoon lectures.

Outside lights were installed here and there, but there were not enough of them to help much. Despite being on the grounds of a national educational institution, the area had a fairly low crime rate.

“What time is it?”

“7:30. What happened to your cell phone, Harumi?”

“The battery died.”

“...The coffee shop should still be open if it’s before 8 right?”

“It makes no sense. That chain has shops in 30 countries, so they must have standard operating hours. They should not be able to close up shop just because there is a temporary lull in customers after 8.”

“This is a university campus, so they do not get customers from elsewhere. I think they were staying open for 5 more hours with no one coming by, so they have altered their hours to match the school events.”

“What is it, boy? You have not said anything for a while.”

Kozue’s oddly distinct voice turned the focus to Anzai, but he simply did not see anywhere to fit into the conversation. How was he supposed to enter into an already completed circle of friends?

At a group party where half a circle met with another half a circle, he would at least have an opening.

“I am glad you are here,” said the (tanned) cabaret club girl with the modern-sounding name of Aisu.

“Why?” replied Anzai.

“I want to ask your opinion about that strange survey. Speaking about it in just our group is fine, but people in the same group do not have much diversity in their ideas. I wanted to get the opinion of someone outside of our group.”

“That really was a weird survey,” said Harumi.

“It gave me an indescribably strange feeling. I was hoping to discuss it before that feeling disappeared so we could try to get a clearer grasp of things. Although the discussion we had in the auditorium just made things all the more confusing.”

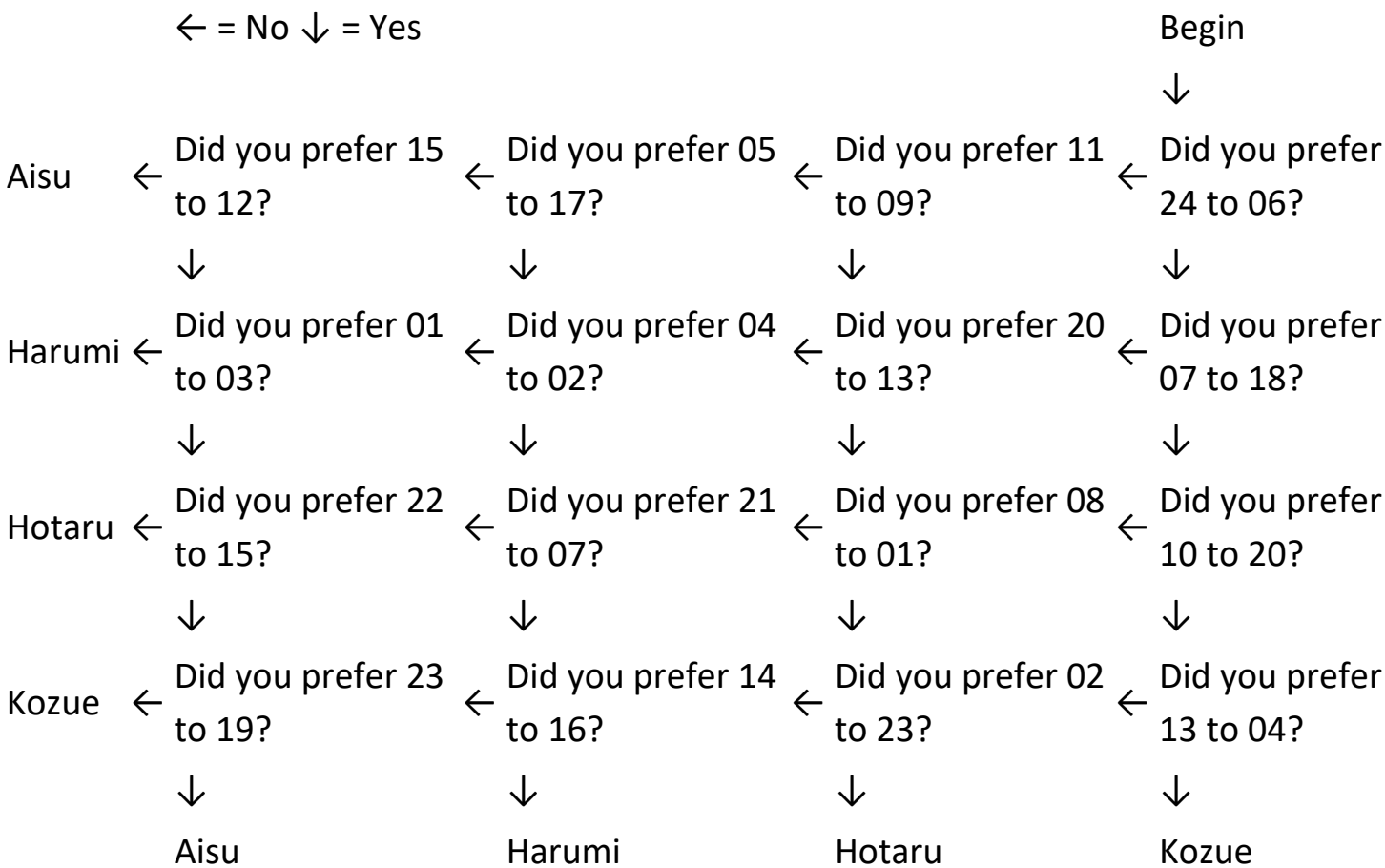
“That is another reason why a new point of view is important.”

“Kozue has started praising you needlessly again, so be on your guard, boy.”

“By the way,” said Harumi as she stared up at Anzai’s face. “What order did you give those short films on your survey?”

(It is time to determine who you are most compatible with. In the following

chart, please honestly use the final rankings you gave each story .)



Continue on to the proper section based on the above chart.

Harumi's Case (Chase the mystery of the other absurdity that supported this absurdity!)

Hotaru's Case (How did that professor have those short films made?)

Kozue's Case (What are these absurdities approaching one after another? Can you accept the answer?)

Aisu's Case (That professor’s questions are not over yet. What will the next question be!?)

Harumi's Case

Part 1

“Hehh. Your results were similar to mine,” said Harumi with her eyes wide.

They spoke as they left the auditorium and walked through the nighttime university campus.

“Does that mean we think similarly? That professor said something about investigating what was in our hearts, so this might mean we have good compatibility.”

“In any case,” said Anzai, cutting off the flow of her comments.

It was just as Aisu had said. He could see how he too would lose his sense of emotional distance if he got caught up in Harumi’s sweetly flowing words.

“That was a strange event. Everything about it was strange. But the strangest thing of all was...”

“Oh, oh, oh!” Harumi raised her hand excitedly. “The way it was all people I had never seen before was strange.”

“?”

“All the other survey participants. I have been here for over half a year, but I had never met any of the other people there.”

“The university’s a big place. That was a collection of problem students, so it shouldn’t be too surprising if it was full of people you didn’t know, right? I mean, I’ve never met any of you before.”

“But I have seen you before.”

“Eh?”

“I have glimpsed you in the campus family restaurant. You always wear the same choker, right? That’s why I remembered you.”

Anzai started coughing.

There was so much room for misunderstandings there and he could see the cabaret club girl named Aisu grinning.

Oblivious to all that, Harumi continued.

“But I do not remember ever even glimpsing any of the other people taking the survey. The professor left right after it was over and the next thing I knew, all the other participants were gone. I wonder why? I get the feeling I will never again see those people who slipped off to go somewhere else.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Ah ha ha. I know. But when I saw you sleeping in the auditorium, I was reminded of a balloon. A balloon caught in a tree branch. I felt like you would float off somewhere if I did not call out to you.”

Places like the convenience store and family restaurant on campus were in dedicated buildings rather than being part of the school buildings. The coffee shop was the same. Teachers and students alike felt it was a pain having to go outside to reach them on rainy days and there might as well not be any on campus if they have to walk all the way across the campus anyway.

When they arrived at the coffee shop, Aisu gave a cruel smile.

“Oh, the manager in the back just clicked his tongue.”

“Of course he did. He just lost his chance to close up early at 8.”

“There’s no one but us here, but I’ll go get us a table.”

“Hotaru-san, just tell us what you want.”

Whenever they did something, Anzai was reminded of the completed circle of those girls’ group. He had to wonder why they had invited him if their circle was so complete.

While he was wondering what to do, Harumi spoke to him from the side.

“The guy’s role is to carry the drinks to the table.”

“I’ll just consider myself lucky that you aren’t expecting me to pay.”

Once the drinks were ready, Anzai carried the plastic tray to the table while muttering something about 4 or 5 paper cups being no problem at all.

“What is that, Harumi? Did you order a mass of cinnamon?”

“Personally, I do not understand how anyone could order it black. That just stabs into your tongue.”

“You’re the same as ever, Hotaru-san. You don’t care what you get, so you always order a new drink or a special seasonal drink.”

“Well, you order the coffee jelly every time you come here. You’re supposed to get drinks here, you know?”

All four girls then turned to Anzai as if to say “So what did you get?” Having a group of essentially strangers focusing on him like that was not exactly comfortable, so he answered right away.

“Brandy.”

“You got something alcoholic!? I did not know they served alcohol here.”

“It says 80 proof. Are you really going to drink it straight?”

“If so, you certainly are not driving home. And since you agreed to a chat that could go on for who knows how long, you must not be worried about making it to the last train either. The area within walking distance of here is quite expensive, so there are no student apartments. From that, it seems likely you live in the dorms.”

“There it is!! Her persistent stalker deductions!! I always wonder why she can’t use that for something more peaceful like criminal investigations!”

The continued teasing must have finally gotten to her because Kozue started flicking some of the clear viscous liquid at Aisu from the back of the lids to her used gum syrup containers.

The cabaret club girl then spewed insults that caused her image as a lady to crumble.

Ignoring all that, Harumi spoke to Anzai.

“Anyway, I was talking about how I have not seen any of the other participants around campus, right?”

“You weren’t done?”

“For some reason it reminds me of the rumors about the people who you can hire to do anything.”

“Oh, I’ve heard of those.”

It was unclear how it connected to what Harumi had been talking about before, so Anzai replied without much enthusiasm. People who would carry out any job were often mentioned on TV, but it was unclear if anyone like that actually existed. At the very least, there was no shop advertising that on their sign and no business with that description at the university’s job hunting department.

“Are there rumors of there being a group like that around here? When I moved here, I remember hearing about people you could hire to cheaply transport your luggage...”

Anzai had not been tempted to try it, though. A proper moving company was one thing, but he thought it was crazy to leave your household tools with some strange people.

“I heard they would get rid of any persistent stalkers.”

“I don’t see the point,” said Anzai as he sipped at his brandy. “There are already people to do those things. Just hire a moving company or call the police. Something legit will be more of a sure thing anyway. You don’t need to go out of your way to hire some suspicious people.”

In an attempt to avoid getting caught in the crossfire of the gum syrup battle, Hotaru scooted her seat closer to Anzai.

“And who even knows how to contact them.”

“With the pocket tissues,” declared Harumi with a grin suddenly. “There is occasionally someone handing out tissues in front of the station near campus.”

“...Is there a phone number written on them you call to contact them?”

Anzai doubted many people would call a strange number because of the chance that the number would incur some exorbitant fee.

Hotaru seemed to agree, but she allowed the conversation to continue. Perhaps that was one trick to allowing friendships to form.

“And it’s needlessly complex. If the person handing out the tissues is their contact, wouldn’t it be faster if he just held a sign and took people’s requests there?”

“Maybe that is because no one wants people to know they are contacting them. You can stick the tissues in your pocket while pretending not to be interested and then call later.”

“If they wanted to keep it a secret, would they really tell some strange person about it? And if this group is really doing suspicious things, would they really stand in front of the station for hours on end? There are so many cameras these days.”

“But...” Whether it was her real opinion or she was just adding to the subject, Hotaru gave an opinion from a different angle. “Whether they use the pocket tissues or not, they would likely have a discreet method of contacting them if they really will do ‘anything’.”

“Anything...? You mean other than helping you move or ridding you of a stalker?”

“I heard someone called in as a prank and asked them to gather people for a group lynching and a group actually gathered.”

“...This just took a dark turn.”

“The person who made the joke was supposedly charged with an exorbitant fee and then went missing when he tried to apologize and explain that it was a joke.”

“In that case, I wonder if the other people in the auditorium were from that group,” said Harumi.

“‘In that case’? I don’t really see the connection, but what would they have been doing there? And who would have hired them?”

“Eh? That professor maybe? Y’know, people hired to fill out a crowd.”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

Anzai and Hotaru both fell silent. Harumi had likely said that without giving it

much thought, but the thought sent a chill down the other two's backs.

Had everyone but them been fakes?

Had it not been a gathering of people without enough credits or who had gotten into some kind of trouble?

Had the people right next to them been strange people who were there for some unknown reason?

And not just a few. Had they been completely surrounded by people like that?

The entire time?

Even though it was possible they could remember what the people around them looked like and could have stolen a glance at where they had filled out their names?

Anzai could feel a cold sweat on his forehead.

He quickly thought about what he had to deny in order to maintain a stable mentality.

"Yeah, but I doubt that group you can hire to do anything even exists."

"True. How many jobs would they even get in a year? I just do not see how it could function as a business."

"If they get few jobs, they would have to charge ridiculous amounts for each individual one."

"If it would cost millions of yen to get them to pull some kind of prank, it would be easier to just do it yourself."

"If all those people were from that group, they would have to make enough money to support a few dozen people."

"Eh? But..."

Harumi was still muttering something in her sweet voice, but Anzai and Hotaru continued to turn down her arguments.

Even so, Harumi's quiet voice slipped into Anzai's ears through the cracks in their arguments.

“Maybe they normally run some other kind of business. And maybe they don’t tell you about the money at first and then use violence to get you to pay the very, very high price.”

Part 2

And that was how the creepy survey came to its end...or so I would like to say. Unfortunately, there seem to be plenty of mysterious things in this world.

It was only the next day.

After one night, the next bizarre phenomenon came in for the attack.

Or...

Perhaps seeing it as “the next” one was a mistake and it was merely a continuation.

Part 3

With his afternoon lecture over, Anzai was done with school for the day.

As he looked through the requests for “safe, school approved jobs” posted on an outdoor bulletin board, Harumi called out to him.

The other three did not seem to be with her.

“Do you need money for your living expenses?”

“No, I was thinking of getting a license. But I looked into it and the driving school is expensive. It costs about 300,000 yen.”

“Oh, I see. I was hoping to get a second smartphone.”

“Eh? You need two at the same time?”

“And that’s why I have this mystery item!!”

Harumi then pulled something out of her pocket with such force that it seemed to ignore the restrictions of the third dimension.

Anzai recognized what the item was just from its silhouette.

But it gave him a powerful feeling of unease.

Yes.

It was a packet of sample pocket tissues the same as the ones rumored to be handed out in front of the station.

Those suspicious tissues were said to contain the phone number of the group you could hire to do anything.

On the surface, it was a completely normal packet of tissues. However, the space for the sample tissues held a blood red piece of paper that had a string of numbers written in an oozing pitch black. The amount of numbers matched that of a phone number, but it was a complete mystery where that number might

lead.

That alone was not enough to prove it was the number of that group.

But...

"A guy was handing out these red pocket tissues in front of the station just like the rumor said."

"I see..."

Since it was a cell phone number rather than a landline number or a toll-free number, Anzai did not want to call it. However, Harumi did not seem concerned in the slightest.

"Okay, I'm going to call."

"You're going to ask them to find a well-paying job?"

"That's too roundabout. I'm going to ask them to hire the two of us!!"

"I had a feeling you were going to get me wrapped up in this!"

Anzai frantically tried to stop Harumi, but she pulled out her (first?) cell phone and called the number written on the pocket tissue.

However, the young woman (?) who answered the phone seemed perplexed.

"This is the number for customers. We cannot accept requests for jobs."

The woman was clearly not used to speaking so politely which made it feel all the more dangerous. Anzai did not want to have anything more to do with it, but Harumi did not seem to mind at all.

"But I want you to grant my request for a job. You say you can do anything people want you to, right?"

"Gh..."

"I want a job for two people that is only 3 times a week, makes over 1000 yen an hour, is not dangerous, and can be easily done by amateurs!!"

"...W-well, don't blame me if anything happens."

She hung up with that line that did not sound like the part of a corporation properly acting as a gear of society.

Anzai's face was completely pale, but Harumi had an unworried smile as she said, "See? This is a simple world."

Part 4

It was a holiday. However, even if his parents had been deathly ill, he had the flu, he was trapped on a desert island in some distant sea, and an asteroid was about to crash into the earth, he would not have been able to cancel the job.

“You don’t get to go back to sleep!!” said Harumi.

“How did you know where my apartment is?”

“Kozue told me.”

“I don’t remember telling Kozue either!!”

They were called out to a completely normal looking vacant lot. A middle-aged man wearing work clothes was there. He smiled and waved over at them. Anzai was prepared to grab a metal pipe off the ground and beat the man over the back of the head if he said they had to be transported somewhere with blindfolds on, but that did not happen.

“There you are. I’m Suzukawa, the section manager. You two are the newcomers I take it.”

“Yes!!”

“Yesssss...”

Anzai’s response was incredibly halfhearted, but the gears of the world continued turning.

“What is our job today!?”

“It’s nearby. We can walk there. Oh, take these. They’re your tools for the job, so take care of them. They’re the life of a worker.”

“...A bucket and...what’s this? A roller-shaped cleaner used to get hair out of carpet?”

“It’s a roller for paint. Girl, you take the paint can.”

“Okay!!”

They were to be working in a rundown apartment complex that was a 5 minute walk away.

In fact, it was the apartment complex Anzai lived in.

“Why has everyone done research into where I live!?”

“What is he talking about?”

“He sometimes says strange things.”

Anzai quite reluctantly followed the other two into the apartment building. They arrived at the room next to his own.

“This is an empty room.”

“...What are we going to do?”

“Paint the walls. It has to look nice for the next person to move in.”

"Hmm," muttered Anzai, but then, "Huh?"

He was overcome by a strange feeling. He had a feeling something about that quickly given premise did not add up.

However, Harumi and the section manager were already heading into the empty room.

And they did not even take off their shoes.

“Here it is. On the roof.”

“Wow.”

“Okay, just paint it over. Hurry. Hurry up now.”

Wondering what they were talking about, Anzai timidly entered the room.

What he found was an eerie stain that he felt should get the room nominated for the top 100 haunted spots in Japan.

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

“Anzai-kun has an over-the-top reaction to everything, doesn’t he?”

"He keeps things lively," replied Harumi.

“To hell with this!! What is that!? It’s clearly a person!! That stain looks just like a life-sized person with their limbs spread out!! What the hell happened in this apartment!?”

“C’mon, hurry up and paint it over.”

“We are paid by the hour, so we do not want to be too quick.”

“No, wait!! Explain this!!!!!! In fact, I don’t think even having the victim of a fatal stabbing on the other side of the ceiling would cause a stain like this! What the hell happened to create such a horrifying stain!?”

(Come to think of it, *a strange girl lived next door* up until about 2 weeks ago! She had white hair, was about 12, referred to herself with the first person pronoun “konata”, and lived alone!! How did things end up so this absurd stain got here!?)

Anzai’s brain seemed to be overheating.

Meanwhile...

“Don’t ask me. I was just told to have you do something about the stain.”

“...So you’re just going to seal it away without knowing what it is?”

“The request wasn’t to figure out what it is.”

As he spoke, the middle-aged section manager removed the lid from the paint can and poured white paint into the bucket. He then took the tool that looked like an adhesive tape roller used to remove stains from carpet and stuck it into the paint.

“Now, get this over with. You shouldn’t need a stepladder for this. C’mon, get to it. You may get paid the same per hour no matter how much work you do, but try not to slack off in front of me.”

“Wahh! The paint drips down on me when I hold up the roller!!” shouted Harumi.

“Isn’t there something else to be surprised by!? And what kind of secrets does this cheap apartment I live in have!?”

However, the other two did not seem to care about anything other than the

money.

The section manager spoke to Anzai who was still complaining.

“This kind of thing is to be expected.”

“Eh!? Are you about to tell me this place is haunted because of some horrible incident from the past!?”

“No. People can hire us to do anything, remember? Well, you made the ridiculous request of a three-days-a-week job that pays 1000 yen an hour. You shouldn’t be surprised to get jobs like this.”

“...So you don’t do jobs like this year-round?”

“No. We will do anything requested of us, so we get a lot of different types of jobs. If you are fine with low wages can choose the safe, easy jobs. With the amount of money you wanted, it’s only natural to get something a little more difficult. So quit complaining.”

“Right!! Right, right!!”

“I’m beginning to worry about Harumi’s IQ...”

As much as Anzai disliked it, a job was a job. He could always ask the landlord about that stain later. Of course, he did not actually live in that room, so it was possible the landlord would have no obligation to tell him about the room next door.

He stuck his paint roller into the bucket to gather some paint. When he stretched up, he could just reach the ceiling. When he thought about it, the whole thing seemed suspicious from the point that they were going straight to painting without removing the wallpaper first, but it was the apartment’s landlord that was plotting something suspicious not the group Anzai was working for.

“...That reasoning gets pretty dangerous if it goes as far as killing someone, though.”

“Did you say something?”

Anzai did not want to cause any trouble, so he switched his mindset over to trying to finish the job.

He pressed some white paint against the ceiling.

Just by moving the roller back and forth, the human-shaped stain would disappear. But then...

“Mm...mm...?”

“It just spoke!! This stain just mumbled somethiiiiinnnnngggg!?”

“Ah!? Don’t wave your roller around!!”

“You’re getting it everywhere. Well, we’re going to be painting it all, so I guess it doesn’t matter.”

They both seemed unconcerned.

That in itself was a problem, but a certain word caught Anzai’s attention.

“All of it?”

“All of it.”

“So we’re not just painting the ceiling, but the walls and floor as well? Wait, is there some reason why we have to do that?”

“That’s what we were asked to do.”

Anzai quickly looked around the walls and floor. One of those walls was shared with his apartment, so he had a serious reason to be concerned.

“W-well, I don’t see any human-shaped stains... Do you?”

“Nope,” said Harumi.

However, a bad feeling oozed up in the back of Anzai’s mind.

“...So there’s something other than a stain there?”

“Probably. Oh, more importantly, hurry up and paint over the stain on the ceiling. It’ll get away.”

“What do you mean the stain will get away!? Does that mean it isn’t actually a stain!? Don’t tell me it’s actually a collection of small, black bugs that just looks like a stain!!”

“Either way, you still need to paint over it. C’mon, hurry, hurry. It’ll escape into the room next door.”

“Gwoooooooooooooooooooooohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

Despite still not knowing what was going on, Anzai swung the roller around like a sacred sword and sealed the (thing that looked like a) black stain behind the paint.

“Well done!!”

“Wow, I wouldn’t think an amateur could do that.”

“Wait!! Did that actually solve this!? I get the feeling it’s still very much alive and we just can’t see it!!”

“The stain is ‘very much alive’? You certainly say some strange things.”

“How poetic!” commented Harumi.

“No fair!! Don’t take normal views of things only when it’s convenient to you!!”

“Okay, that may be done, but we still need to paint the rest. Anzai-kun, you cover up the hair sticking out from the cracks in the floor. It seems to be slowly but forcefully heading this way.”

“Noooooooo!! This time it’s something clearly physical!?”

“Ha ha ha! How can you call this obviously unnatural hair a physical phenomenon!?” said Harumi.

“Oh, so you’re admitting that these things aren’t normal now!?”

Afterwards, the three were faced with “a large quantity of mold that clearly looked like a baby’s handprints”, “a wall covered in breast-shaped protrusions discovered when they removed the installed bathtub”, “feminine writing saying ‘delicious’ that looked like it had been scratched there by someone’s fingernails”, and other similar phenomena. They sent them all back to the darkness.

In the evening after they had finished, Anzai’s face was completely pale.

“...I-I need to go check if there are any paint trails in my room!!”

“Wow, getting 1000 yen an hour just to paint is great!” said Harumi.

“Yes, but be glad you kept it at the 1000 yen line. You would have gotten even

worse jobs if you had asked for the 1200 yen line. Those jobs are at the Ab. Buster level.”

“Things worse than this!?”

(And what's that term he used? Ab. Buster!?)

“Yes.” The section manager who was experienced in such darker things nodded. “There’s a national university nearby, right? We recently had a job to pretend to be students there. That survey is definitely something I want nothing to do with.”

Hotaru's Case

Part 1

“What a coincidence. That’s the same as me,” said Hotaru.

She was tall and had long, black hair. She was beautiful, but it was the type of beauty that brought words like “shudder” or “scary” to mind. To be blunt, Anzai felt she would be the hardest to find anything to speak about with.

“You would probably like the same movies,” said Harumi.

“It is not like anyone is wrong, but it would be annoying for everyone else if you talk about it. Well, it is still better than talking about baseball.”

“Aisu, you need to do something about your habit of grabbing strange guys with one arm in the diner while watching TV and holding a beer mug in the other hand...Oh?”

Kozue trailed off.

As they left the auditorium, she looked up into the night sky and held up her palms as if to catch something.

Hotaru frowned.

“Is it raining?”

As soon as she muttered that, Anzai felt a large drop fall on the top of his nose. That drop was followed by what seemed like buckets of rain. The school building was a good distance from the coffee shop and none of them had an umbrella. The five of them frantically ran back into the auditorium.

They had turned off the lights when they left, so it was pitch black. However, it was not locked. Or rather, it had been left unlocked.

“Hyaahh!! The rain is really coming down!”

“With rain this heavy, it probably will not last all night.”

“I’m soaking wet.”

“Unfortunately for you, boy, it is pitch black. If the lights were on, you would have gotten a fanservice scene out of all four of us.”

Anzai ignored Hotaru and instead checked on his things. He did not carry much in the way of school supplies in his bag, but it seemed the water resistant spray the department store clerk had talked him into buying had been effective. He unzipped it and stuck his hand inside, but nothing felt wet.

Next, he checked the cell phone he had in his pants pocket.

Anzai pulled out the phone and turned it on. Luckily, the usual passcode screen came up. It did not seem to be broken.

As Anzai focused on his cell phone, the cabaret club-looking girl named Aisu screamed.

“Gyaaahhhh!! Just as I thought our wet and see-through clothes had been protected by the defense of darkness, he brings out that backlight!?”

“?”

“As requested, I shall perform the safety blindfold security!” shouted Harumi from behind Anzai who had instinctually turned in the direction of Aisu when she had screamed.

In the next instant, his eyes were covered by two wet hands. His vision was suddenly cut off and at the same time he felt something soft press against his back.

Something like an electric current shot through the core of Anzai’s body.

It went beyond simply seeming like her guard was too low.

“Aisu, you tried to make it look like you were embarrassed while letting out that shout to draw all the attention to yourself, didn’t you?”

“No, that was my real response! And with the way she is clinging to him, I think Harumi has won the most points here!!”

“She is just smiling and keeping that same position!?”

“What? What? What are you getting so worked up about?” asked Harumi.

“Honestly, what are you people doing?” said Hotaru in exasperation.

Anzai then felt someone take the cell phone from his hand. When Harumi removed her “blindfold” from him, all light sources were gone. Someone returned his cell phone to him in the darkness.

“The cell phone is off limits. Got it?”

“I was just checking to see if it still worked, so that’s fine by me.”

“Aisu, you failed to draw enough attention to yourself. Harumi overshadowed you,” commented Kozue.

“We’re always like this, aren’t we?”

Anzai could hear them speaking in the darkness, but he did not try to join in. The best he could manage was nodding in the direction he thought Hotaru was in.

“This rain is lasting longer than I expected,” said Hotaru’s voice. “With how strong it was, I assumed it would end quickly.”

“If it’s going to last until morning, we’re going to have to prepare ourselves,” replied Anzai offhandedly.

He of course was not talking about staying there overnight. He was talking about running home through the rain.

Aisu continued, “This auditorium is pretty big, so there might be an umbrella stand with an umbrella left in it.”

“Taking things that are not yours is wrong, Aisu.”

“We can return it tomorrow. It is at least worth looking into.”

But they could find nothing of the sort near the entrance of the auditorium. They were forced to search by feeling around with their hands, but the umbrella stand appeared to be empty.

“Just like car demolitions, the teachers might periodically remove any left behind.”

“But this means we have no way of leaving.”

“I know!” said Harumi. “This is an auditorium, so they must have lots of trash cans. If we can find the office, maybe they will have new trash bags.”

“If you put one of those over your head, walk through the metropolitan shopping district, and ride the bus or the train, I say they should make a statue honoring your bravery to put at the school gate.”

“Huh?” said Anzai.

Because of the small bit of illumination from the outside lights, the path was faintly lit just outside the entrance to the auditorium. He spotted something shiny there. The girls seemed unwilling to let him see them with their wet clothes making their underwear visible, so they were not approaching the light. However, Anzai was in a different position. He approached the glass door to check and he figured out what it was.

“There’s a plastic umbrella on the ground there.”

Two or three pieces of the metal framework were broken, so the plastic sheet was fluttering. A strong gust of wind or something else must have broken it, so its owner had thrown it away. However, it would likely still keep the rain off of them.

Anzai laid his bag and phone down on the ground, opened the glass door, and headed back outside. He picked up the broken plastic umbrella and hurried back.

“To the victor go the spoils. It looks like we can move on to the next step. ... Wait, what is it?”

The area within the auditorium was even darker than the area right next to the glass door where Anzai stood, so he could not see them. However, he sensed a tenseness in the atmosphere.

Hotaru broke the silence.

“For future reference, girls do get embarrassed when they see the underwear of a member of the opposite sex.”

“? More importantly, I got us an umbrella...”

“No, not more importantly! Argh, just come here!!”

“Aisu, are you going to embrace him because you are unable to restrain yourself?”

“What!? I’m saying guys need the defense of darkness as well!!”

At their urging, Anzai headed back into the darkness.

“Anyway, I found an umbrella.”

“Yes, yes. An umbrella.”

“...It is physically impossible for all five of us to fit under this half-broken umbrella.”

“Kozue, did you just gulp in anticipation?”

“No, I would think that was Aisu.”

They were ignoring Anzai as they continued the conversation.

“Anyway, can’t we just have one person use this to head to the convenience store and buy some more umbrellas?” he suggested.

“Oh! Nice one! Nice idea!”

“Well, that is at least realistic.”

“Wait, young ones! You are suggesting one of us heads out into those lights while soaking wet!!”

“This could become a night to remember.”

Anzai decided it would be a bit harsh to force that on a girl when her underwear was clearly visible.

“Well, I suggested it, so I’ll go.”

“Wait, boy!! Personally, I think you would be the most dangerous option!!”

“?”

“If one of us must have embarrassment brought upon us, I think we should decide it using rock paper scissors.”

“I suppose, but I’m the guy. I might as well...”

“No, that is the very reason! It is because you are a guy that you must not, you idiot!!”

Anzai was stopped by logic he could not comprehend. It might have been

some kind of special rule of groups of girls.

Even so...

“But we have to head through the shopping district to get home. And you mentioned using the train or bus. We’re all going to have to head out into the light eventually.”

“...!?”

“!”

“!!”

“...!!”

His casual comment received four gasps in response. It seemed to be a matter of life or death for the girls.

“H-how long does it take for clothes to dry?”

“It would take all night for them to air dry. We might need a hair dryer or something.”

“No, that won’t cut it. We need a proper clothes dryer.”

“Give this proper thought,” said Kozue. “Are you suggesting we use a laundromat without a change of clothes? What are we supposed to do while our clothes tumble around in the dryer?”

“You say that, Kozue, but you actually think this might be your chance, don’t you!?”

“C-could you stop projecting your own thoughts onto me, Aisu?”

As the conversation started derailing in a strange direction, Hotaru tried to correct its course.

“Anyway, we first end to acquire enough umbrellas for all of us to have mobility. We must decide who will head to the convenience store using rock paper scissors.”

“Okay, let’s start! Rock, paper...”

“No, wait,” cut in Anzai. “We can’t see each other’s hands in this darkness.”

They all fell silent.

In the end, they chose themselves to abandon the defense of darkness that had protected them all. The four girls were forced to expose their forms by approaching the glass door through which illumination from the outside lights entered. The state of their clothes was less of an issue for Anzai than the way they embarrassedly wriggled their bodies.

“Rock paper scissors!!!!”

They swung their arms half in desperation, but once the game was over, a thought came to Anzai.

“...I just realized. We could have just called out our hands in the darkness.”

In the next instant, four “rocks” flew his way.

Part 2

To be blunt, the four wet girls with see-through clothes left more of an impact with Anzai than the mysterious survey. What stuck with him strongest was Hotaru's underwear. Her atmosphere had been that of a cool beauty from beginning to end, so he had not expected them to be so unorthodox...or to be a little more blunt, crazy.

And so...

When Anzai woke in his bed the next day, he had already forgotten about the survey. It was no different from a report he had already turned in, so there was nothing to be gained by remembering it.

However...

The world contained some strange things. They were there whether you wanted to admit it or not.

Or rather...

To put it simply, that thing he had thought was over was not over in the slightest.

Part 3

Rainy days were so melancholy.

After barely paying attention to a foreign language lecture he doubted he would remember, Anzai ran across Hotaru who he had been 80% sure he would never see again. It seemed the other three were not with her.

She was beautiful, but she was the upperclassman type of girl who was so beautiful that guys would be reluctant to speak to her.

She was the type of beauty that would bring about silence during karaoke. Anzai himself could feel the gears within him clenching up.

“Anzai-kun was it? What is your next class?”

“Math. Today’s the day I work through my general education requirements.”

“So skip it.”

“What do you mean ‘so’?”

“You’ll never use what you learn in that class, right?”

Anzai had a feeling that same line of reasoning would make all 5 subjects through middle and high school unnecessary, but he did not particularly want to go to math class that day, so he did not argue.

The real issue was what they would do instead.

“So what are we doing? Are we going somewhere?”

“Remember yesterday’s survey?”

They left the lecture hall as they spoke.

Hotaru’s expression did not change.

“Do you remember the name of the professor who ran it?”

“Tanaka-san, I think. I’m pretty sure he introduced himself before the survey.”

“Yes, that is all the information I had. I had some business with the office, so I asked them while I was there, but it seems there is no professor named Tanaka at this university.”

“...Hah?”

Anzai’s thoughts froze up.

He understood what the words Hotaru was speaking meant, but he could not grasp what she was getting at.

“Tanaka is a common name. It’s probably in the top 5 of Japan’s most common family names. The fact that there is not a single person with that name working here left a strong impression with the office worker I asked. He called it a university with no Tanakas.”

Anzai’s mind was blank, but he could still feel sweat on his cheek. It took a bit longer for him to realize why it was there. It was raining outside. The actual lecture hall may have been a bit warm, but a pleasant coolness from outside had filled the hallway. In other words, the sweat had not been produced by heat.

“...Then who was that professor? ...Or what was that survey for that matter.”

“It makes you curious, doesn’t it? Some suspicious person came in from outside the university, gathered some students, gave them a creepy survey related to their minds and hearts, and then left. What was it all for? And how did he do it? This is a national university, so its security is decent. He could have carried out this survey anywhere, so why did he choose somewhere as dangerous as the university. Also, why did he choose us and go so far as to research our personal situations to lure us in?”

“Wait, what does this mean about my credits!? If this supposed Tanaka-san isn’t a professor here, I might not actually make it through the first term!”

“ ... ”

Hotaru fell silent and kicked Anzai lightly in the shin.

Anzai cried out, jumped back, and had tears fill his eyes.

“Can you please not ruin the mood?” she said expressionlessly.

“I don’t want to hear that from the person who convinced me to skip class!!”

Part 4

Their university had no professor named Tanaka.

In that case, who was that supposed professor?

And what had that survey been? What had been taken from them?

That was what they were looking into, but...

“So what exactly are we going to investigate while I skip class?” asked Anzai.

“That Tanaka-san is not from our university, right? We aren’t going to find anything wandering around in the university.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” said Hotaru, easily denying his comment. “I may not know what the point of that survey was, but I have a guess as to where he got the short films used in it. They were likely filmed by the university’s film studies club.”

“Do you have any proof of that?”

“I recognized some of the locations in the short films. I think they were shot on campus here. Most likely, whoever this was claiming to be a professor named Tanaka casually requested that the film studies club produce the short films.”

“...So he was on campus for more than just the short time last night?”

“Creepy, isn’t it? It makes him sound like a Youkai or something.”

Following Hotaru, Anzai arrived at the film studies club room. (Was club room the right term? Anzai was not part of any club, so he was not sure.)

“Naturally, it’s locked.”

“You can get a mold by pouring rubber adhesive into the keyhole. Getting it out can be tricky, though.”

“...*You* seem like a Youkai to me.”

Hotaru used a slightly uneven key made of what was likely tin rather than iron or aluminum, and the door easily unlocked.

As they entered, Anzai asked a question.

“So what is in here that you want?”

“I don’t know what is in here, but there is something I am hoping is.”

“?”

“Those short films. I am curious about a few things. I would like to watch them again to check.”

After a bit of searching, they easily found what they were looking for. It was a USB drive with “For the Survey” written on the sticker meant for the owner’s name.

“Huh? Wasn’t it on a giant film reel when he showed it in the auditorium?”

“They probably edited it digitally and then burned it back onto film. The film studies club can be oddly picky about that kind of thing. This is a 20,000 yen high capacity USB drive and the films needed the entire thing to themselves. Video certainly does eat up space.”

“That can be changed using compression, but I suppose this is the film studies club after all. Even though the human eye can’t tell the difference, people like that still refuse to use any kind of video compression.”

Anzai wondered what Hotaru wanted to check about the short films.

She stuck the USB drive into a slot on her smartphone and played the video on the small screen.

Anzai wondered how long it would take, but Hotaru nodded after only 3 minutes.

“Aha, I was right. Look, here, here, and here.”

“Is there a ghost in the video?”

“Even better.” Hotaru paused the video. “Are you familiar with the term ‘gray fiction’?”

“...You mean like alien movies?”

“That isn’t entirely wrong.”

She responded to his joke with a serious expression.

Anzai was feeling a bit over his head, but Hotaru expressionlessly continued.

“It refers to a fiction story that cannot be labeled as nonfiction due to various circumstances. You sometimes hear about this issue due to political reasons, but it was used recently in a film that showed a UFO research facility and a horror film with the motif of a vengeful spirit of a Heian period noble.”

“What about it?”

“These short films are the same.” Despite how ridiculous what she was saying was, her expression was perfectly composed. “Gray fiction works leave small signs that the general viewer will overlook. Those signs can be seen in these short films. It is possible these things just so happened to get caught in the frame, but in all likelihood it was no accident.”

“Eh? Wait...do you mean this *white-haired girl* at the edge of the frame?”

“No, not that.”

(But then who is this girl?)

Anzai still had questions, but Hotaru was not about to let the conversation head in that direction.

“My conclusion is that all of the short films shown were gray fiction.”

“...You mean they were actually nonfiction?”

“Yes.”

“But weren’t there fairies and ninja in those!? Wasn’t one story about slicing apart a troll in an RPG-style Middle Ages-esque fantasy world that never existed in history!?”

“Don’t ask me. I don’t know how it is possible either.” Hotaru sighed. “But it seems like the short films do not show the entirety of some strange world. It feels more like just one room or one section from that world. Perhaps there is some room in some building or some underground dome where those things are happening. Or perhaps there is no mysterious world and there is merely

some room somewhere on earth that just looks like some mysterious world.”

(That’s ridiculous...)

If you were told that a hero and demon king existed somewhere on the earth, would you believe it?

And a computer virus that spoke like a human seemed in a way more fantastical than even the hero or demon king.

“But what is the definition of nonfiction?” asked Anzai.

“Hm?”

“Nostradamus’ The Prophecies is considered nonfiction. In other words, nonfiction does not mean the contents are true. It just means the author wrote it *thinking* it was true. In that case...”

“The professor was just insane?”

“Thinking about it that way puts me a lot more at ease.”

“Perhaps,” admitted Hotaru. But then, “Or perhaps there is a single common rule behind all of this that has convinced the professor that he has actually seen these things.”

“...You mean like hypnotism?”

“How cliché. At least go so far as to say he made short films showing what he has witnessed in his time chasing after a certain large plot.”

Anzai had no response.

For one thing, the signs of it being gray fiction may have been something the supposed professor had put in there as a prank.

But what meaning was there in doing that?

“In the end, what did that professor want to do? What meaning was there in having those filmed? In fact, what was the purpose of the survey itself?”

“Who knows.” Hotaru said noncommittally before adding another cryptic remark. “But I get the feeling there is a connection.”

“?”

“I feel there is a connection between the strange events told of in those short films and how that professor snuck into the university, carried out that survey, and then disappeared. And if there is a connection, we may become indirectly wrapped up in some strange events that began with those short films.”

“...I don't like the sound of that.”

“No. But if those short films really are gray fiction, that professor may have come to the proper conclusion.”

“What do you mean?”

“People who loudly insist they were abducted by a UFO are a type of ‘strange’ different from the UFOs themselves. Absurdities, you could call them. Or if there was a specialist who you could ask questions to like a customer service line but only about demons, that specialist would be an absurdity of a different sort from demons.” Hotaru paused for a second. “In other words, those who work to analyze mysterious things will be dyed by the thing they are facing and become a type of absurdity themselves. With the experience it would take to put together that survey based on gray fiction, that mysterious professor has likely been completely changed into an absurdity. ...Whoever he might have originally been.”

“...”

After hearing all that, Anzai finally realized something.

The survey was not the most dangerous thing.

Neither was the professor.

The most dangerous thing was before his very eyes.

“H-hey, where are the people from the film studies club? If you wanted to learn about these short films, wouldn't it have been best to ask them first? They were the ones who actually had the cameras rolling before these mysterious things.”

“This would have been a lot easier if that was possible.”

She did not give any specifics.

However, Anzai sensed some kind of ominous end in her ambiguous

statement.

They could not check with those people.

They could not speak with those people.

They had no idea where those people were.

Yes.

It was the same as with the professor.

“Your theory was that the professor went crazy while analyzing these mysterious things, right? Let’s set aside whether it’s due to something physical or something mental, though.”

“Yes, it is just a theory. But that is what it is like with grimoires and magic circles, isn’t it? They merely display the workings of the world in text or diagram form.”

“Well, if the change can happen just by analyzing these things...”

Anzai pointed.

He pointed at the most dangerous thing.

He pointed at the USB drive in Hotaru’s hand that contained the short film footage.

“...Isn’t just having that thing around dangerous?”

“Yes. Compared to the survey, the professor, the people from the film studies club, viewing each individual short film, or gray fiction itself...”

Hotaru smiled.

As she was usually expressionless, it was a surprisingly big smile.

“...Don’t you think this USB drive has the absurd in a much, much more condensed form? It is like a magic wand that allows you to level up without end simply by waving it around.”

Kozue's Case

Part 1

“You had a similar result to me,” said Kozue in her clear voice.

“But it was just ranking them according to how good they were. Wouldn’t everyone get pretty much the same thing?”

“No, you were completely different from me,” said Harumi.

“And from me,” said Hotaru.

(Is that how it works?)

Anzai left the auditorium with the girls and headed for the coffee shop. He had somehow ended up going with them, but he had no idea why.

The building with the coffee shop was a fair distance from the auditorium. The path there was almost pitch black, but Kozue started to rummage around in her handbag.

“Kozue, what are you doing?”

“I think I forgot my ballpoint pen in the auditorium.”

“Those cost 100 yen. You can buy a new one at the convenience store.”

“I do not care if I forgot it, but I want to make sure that I did indeed forget it. I would feel like I had lost if I bought one I did not need.”

“Your pen case does seem to keep getting more and more mechanical pencils.”

Hotaru used the backlight of her cell phone to light up Kozue’s handbag, but it did not provide enough light. Digging around in the bag when it was so dark would only cause more of the bag’s contents to fall out.

“How about you check once we arrive at the coffee shop?” suggested Harumi, but Anzai pointed in a different direction.

“There’s a bulletin board over there.”

The old board was used to post notifications about different clubs. A fluorescent light was installed so it could be read at night. The pure white light did not completely eliminate the darkness in the area, but it was better than a cell phone backlight.

When they approached the bulletin board, a lot of small dead bugs could be seen in the light. It must not have been cleaned very often. It was neither time for new members to join the clubs nor time for the cultural festival, so the information posted lacked a certain shine.

“Oh, I do have the pen.”

“Now you don’t have to get another new one.”

“So you worried us for nothing,” said Aisu lightly. “Y’know, I cannot believe bulletin boards like this still exist. This is the 21st century. It would be a lot easier to just send out an email to everyone.”

“Some stubborn professors might not like those electronic methods.”

“Or maybe some people have more sense than to give out their email address just to receive a ton of pointless bulletins.”

“I see. So that stubbornness goes beyond just the professors.”

Anzai did not particularly care, so he was hoping they could just get to the coffee shop. The nights were getting colder, but there were still plenty of bugs around. They were all flying around near the light and he was finding it quite annoying.

“Hotaru-san. Let’s go,” said Harumi as she turned back towards the bulletin board just after they started to leave.

Anzai turned back too and found Hotaru still standing in front of the bulletin board.

“Did you find something interesting?”

“Hotaru is a romanticist.”

“?”

With some things, those four girls seemed to have a shared understanding of their own, so Anzai was sometimes unable to comprehend what they were talking about.

Hotaru soon joined the rest of them and they headed for the coffee shop. Similar to the family restaurant and the convenience store, it was in a building not used for classrooms. However...

“It’s closed.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Hotaru, what time is it?”

“8:30. ...It looks like we used up too much time dealing with Kozue’s pen.”

It was a worldwide chain, so it did have standard hours, but the manager had a habit of closing up shop if he found a chance. No lights were on in the coffee shop.

Anzai and the others had no choice but to head to the Spanish cuisine family restaurant in the same building.

“People’s opinions vary a lot about this place depending on whether they like seafood or not.”

From the look on Kozue’s face, it seemed her opinion of the place was on the negative end of things.

However, something else drew Anzai’s attention even more.

“Wait, why are you squeezing in so tight...?”

“They only have tables for 4, so we have no choice.”

“Oh, but I think it is no coincidence that you are pressed against the window with Kozue in the position right next to you. It seems Kozue is trying to monopolize you.”

“That is not true.”

None of them were particularly hungry, so they shared a large salad between the five of them. Naturally, it was covered in shrimp, squid, and shellfish. The displeased look on Kozue’s face escalated.

The cabaret club girl named Aisu sipped at some hot coffee and said, “I guess you aren’t going to get much better than this when the drinks are self-service.”

“Any kind of black coffee just tastes bitter to me,” said Harumi.

“I guess they don’t have any national drinks like matcha. The food is more national, though,” said Hotaru.

“That is just how family restaurants are,” commented Kozue.

Anzai wondered why people were always so harsh in their judgments of national chains. Of course, the coffee shop they had wanted to go to had shops in 30 countries.

Perhaps brands had a way of affecting people’s tastes.

“Anyway, that was a very strange survey.”

“What was it all about, anyway? Was it just something that professor was doing for fun?”

Anzai doubted he could give out credits if it was just for fun.

On the other hand, he could not see any practical use for it either.

“Perhaps he was trying to get some data he needed for his research.”

“But wouldn’t he have to get our permission to use us in a paper?”

“He might be able to get around that if he uses the information in a way that makes it impossible to tell who the person is.”

“Well, I do not really see how it could hurt to let him know which short films we liked,” said Aisu offhandedly while she sipped at her cheap coffee.

Despite her complaints about the family restaurant, she did not seem to be in a particularly bad mood.

Anzai then asked something he was curious about.

“By the way, what field is that professor from? Psychology?”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“...Huh?”

A strange silence fell over them. They all exchanged glances. Anzai was able to guess what it meant just from seeing their expressions. However, he still could not believe it.

“Wait a second. ...None of you has had a lecture from him?”

“So you do not know who he is either?”

Either.

That word of Kozue’s gave certainty to the thought in Anzai’s mind. Anzai was surprised that no one knew the professor, but he also realized that he did not know those girls either. He doubted they were in the same course of study as him. A professor from his own field might be able to give credits, but would a single professor be able to give credits to students from different fields across the university?

“What about the other people?” asked Harumi. “I think there were about 30 of them.”

“I have nothing to back this up,” replied Kozue clearly. “But I get the feeling that we would get no real information even if we tracked down the other participants and asked them.”

“Like any university, ours has plenty of eccentric professors. It’s possible this was just some old man who toes the line between being an idiot and a genius charging off in some strange direction.”

“If so, what does that mean for my credits?”

If that event had been run by some crazy (but perhaps capable since he still had his job) old man, then those credits could never pan out. It was possible that professor had never discussed it with those in charge of Anzai’s major.

“Well, we may not know what that old man was after, but why were we chosen?”

“He sort of explained that at the beginning. He was probably targeting students who needed credits, those with attendance issues, or those with behavioral issues.”

“Do you think he might have had another reason?”

“How should I know? We have no idea what the point of the survey was, so if who he selected is related to that, we have no way of figuring it out.”

“True.”

However, even if it had all been some capable but crazy old man having some fun, it changed nothing. The survey was over. If nothing more would happen and they had lost nothing from it, there was no reason to look into it further.

The only problem Anzai cared about was what was to become of his credits.

Or so he thought...

Part 2

Strange things did happen.

But the problem was that while those strange things would often happen, they rarely came to the people who wished for them.

The only thought on Anzai's mind was "Why me?"

But since such things had come to him, nothing could be done about it.

He simply had to deal with those strange things.

Part 3

“I saw something alarming.”

Anzai was eating in the university cafeteria. Unlike the family restaurant or coffee shop, the cafeteria was directly attached to one of the university buildings. As one would expect given that most of the students used the more distant coffee shop and such, the cafeteria food was not very good.

Anzai was putting up with the poor flavor to save some money when Kozue suddenly placed a bowl of tanuki udon on the table and spoke to him. It seemed the other three were not with her.

“?”

He picked up some mysterious pasta with chopsticks, brought it to his mouth, and frowned. He then raised his head once more. It really did seem Kozue was speaking to him.

“I saw something alarming.”

“Did you see a professor sleeping with one of the women in the university office?” he replied.

“It goes beyond that. It was...um...hm...How should I put it? At any rate, it goes beyond that. I am sure it goes well beyond the bounds of your imagination. However, that is not your fault. It is not your imagination that is the problem. It is how extreme a phenomenon this was. To be blunt, I do not think I can accurately explain it in words.”

(If you can't explain it in words, why have you been trying to do just that?)

As he thought, Anzai filled his mouth with pasta that was orange but had a flavor you would never get from a ketchup-type sauce.

“What did you see?”

“I just told you that I cannot explain it. Or rather, I could put it in words, but it would sound too clichéd to get across the essence of what it was.”

“Was it a crime? An object? A phenomenon? A person?”

Not even Anzai was sure what basis those categories came from. However, it seemed to help Kozue. Rather than saying what it was, she could use the process of elimination by saying what it was not.

“It was not a crime. At the very least, I do not think there was anything illegal about it.”

“Then was it a scandal involving someone famous or a surprising phenomenon like a dog standing up on two legs?”

“Oh!! That is exactly it. If I had to choose one of those, it was a surprising phenomenon!!”

“...Why did you say that is ‘exactly it’ if you also have to qualify that you are only choosing that ‘if you have to choose one’? That just gives me a sense of chaos.”

“A dog standing on two legs would not be a problem. Something normal doing something abnormal is merely surprising. But what do you call it when something abnormal does something abnormal?”

“You’re getting a little too poetic. My understanding can’t keep up.”

“Yes. Yes, that is right. But it is not your fault. To repeat myself, it is simply that what I saw was too absurd. There is nothing wrong with your imagination.”

She was denying it, but Anzai still had a feeling she was blaming him. Also, his lunch break did not last forever, so he had to ignore the taste and finish off his meal for the nutrition and feeling of fullness.

Since he wanted to focus on his food, he tried to get a quick answer out of Kozue.

“So what exactly was it?”

“I do not know.”

“Can’t you at least give me a hint? I can’t get anywhere without a starting

point.”

“But I am not sure I can express it in words.”

“How about you start by working to sum it up in 1000 words?”

“How many pages of manuscript paper is that?”

“Two and a half.”

“Two and a half, hm?”

“But I don’t think anyone actually writes manuscripts using that anymore.”

“This is not a book report, so I cannot explain it in that many words.”

“Okay, what about 100 words?”

“That is less.”

“Go all out and do it in 50 words.”

“And that is even less.”

“25 words?”

“I saw a fairy over there. How many was that?”

(Ehh?)

Before Anzai could utter his surprise out loud, Kozue seemed to sense it from his expression.

Unlike a UFO nut, she seemed perfectly aware that she was saying something that went against common knowledge. Kozue’s face was beet red, but her tone of voice when she spoke next made it sound like she wanted any objections to be directed to the fairy she had seen.

“I-I saw it, so it cannot be helped! I was not trying to see that!! And yet it rudely crossed by before me, so it truly cannot be helped!! In fact, why did I have to see something like that!?”

“Ehh?”

“You finally said it, you monster!! You came at me straight on while I was trying to create a defensive line of words!!”

“But...a fairy? Ehh?”

“I took a picture with my phone.”

“That I’d like to see.”

However, the picture visible on Kozue’s cell phone was so out of focus it was impossible to even make out the background to tell where the photo had been taken. If Anzai had been told the photo was meant for a Rorschach test, he would have believed it.

“...Ehh?”

“Now I know just how much it hurts to hesitate in shock and then have someone deny it happened! But it cannot be helped. It only happened for an instant. I feel I reacted quite quickly in order to immediately pull out my cell phone, change it to camera mode, and press the shutter button in that time.”

But what was this fairy she was talking about?

What exactly did it look like?

“It was about – here we go – this tall. About as tall as these chopsticks.”

“I see, I see.”

“It was a girl...I think. Due to the size difference, I am not sure our standards apply, but its face looked like that of a 10 year old.”

“Hmm...”

“It was wearing green clothes.”

“...”

“It did not have dragonfly-like wings, but it was definitely a fairy. It just gave that impression. If you showed it to 100 people, all of them would call it a fairy.”

“...Zzz.”

“Sigh.”

Kozue broke apart the chopsticks, grabbed a green onion from her hot tanuki udon, and threw it at Anzai’s sleeping forehead.

“Geshburumaverfehhhh!! Hot...Hot!?”

“You shouted buruma amid all that, didn’t you?”

But no matter what one said, people in the 21st century simply would not believe that someone had seen a fairy. The time for that had passed. It was the same as how spirit photographs had faded away once easily-edited digital photos rose in popularity. It was the same as how people had no problem openly discussing the Kuchisake-Onna with people. It just seemed wrong to get too caught up in that kind of thing. It all seemed so old and passed its expiration date.

For those reasons, Anzai Kyouusuke’s belief in what Kozue was saying was at 0%.

With 100% as the max, it was at 0%.

That is quite important, so remember it.

Yes.

For now, it was at 0%.

Part 4

(How strange.)

He had that thought right after his afternoon class when he was thinking of heading to the supermarket to get a bento for dinner.

He owned a cell phone, but he did not have a smartphone. He had won a small mobile computer (that was about the size of a makeup pouch) at a drawing in the shopping district, so he had no need for another small device with which to access the internet.

The background wallpaper was set to a picture taken over summer break when he and a few others from his apartment complex had helped out some kids with a project. If he recalled correctly, it had been a water rocket for their middle school. As expected, everyone involved had ended up soaking wet. One of the people who had helped out, *a white-haired girl of about 12* had only moved in recently. He still had some contact with her over the phone, but he could never seem to contact her from his end for some reason.

Suddenly, a small red popup appeared in the bottom left side of the small screen.

It said the following:

Malicious code "Int.worm/Gold_Stealer" detected.

Resolving the situation.

Click the report for details.

"..."

That in and of itself was not too strange. Actually getting infected by a computer virus was one thing, but anyone who had almost constant access to the internet was familiar with having one blocked.

The problem was the name.

Just as Anzai was feeling a bit uneasy, Kozue (who had approached him at some point) whispered in his ear.

“...What a familiar name.”

“Wah!?”

“What a familiar name. Gold Stealer. ...Wasn’t that part of that professor’s survey? I believe it was in a story about a computer virus that looked like a kunoichi.”

“...Wait, do you even have a class in this building?”

“That is a trivial issue,” she said smoothly before pointing at the bottom left of the screen with her slender finger. “This is the bigger issue. What is that? I see a fairy and you get a computer virus...”

“No, wait. There’s no connection there...wait, is there?”

Anzai recalled that there had also been a small fairy dressed in green clothes in one of the short films from that professor’s survey. The story had been about creating a casket bed.

“But a fairy is like a ghost or a UFO. This is just a virus. In fact, the professor might have based that short film on a virus that actually exists.”

“I just did a search on my phone, but I could not find a single example of a virus called Gold Stealer. It keeps assuming I misspelled it and giving me other names to search for. It is pissing me off.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Anzai frowned. “There’s no official name for viruses anyway, right? That might just be what the security company calls it. Since the software detected it and is calling it Gold Stealer, the security company must call it that.”

“But I cannot find anything no matter how much I search.”

“What...?”

Anzai brought up the security software’s official site on his mobile computer and entered the virus name in the search box.

But it came up with 0 results.

“...Then what was that popup?”

“Yes, I wonder. Hee hee. It does not have quite the impact of the fairy I saw, but you could still call this an unexplainable absurd phenomenon. Hee hee.”

“Why are you looking so triumphant?”

“I-I am not looking triumphant!!”

“How suspicious. Did you send this to me to get me wrapped up in all this?”

“A ridiculous accusation! Are you using me as a scapegoat to keep your thoughts in the realm of the realistic!?”

“If you added it to the malware list in my security software, it would show a popup saying it had detected the Gold Stealer. That is much more realistic than thinking a virus that is like an AI out of a manga actually exists. And you are the only one who would benefit from this.”

“Nonsense! Utter nonsense!! Also, I find that super hacker-like ability you are suggesting to be much more absurd than a fairy!!”

Kozue continued to protest, but Anzai did not care. He put the mobile computer back in his bag and headed for the supermarket to buy a cheap meal.

However, the next oddity occurred as soon as he left the evening lecture hall and entered the hallway.

He saw arrows.

Colorful arrows stretched across the different routes through the hallway.

“...These were in the short films, too.”

“What now?”

“I think the arrows display the genre of your destiny. Like love comedy or horror.”

However, he refused to accept it.

(Wait, didn't the story say you needed some kind of implant installed in your brain to see these!? That's scary! I'll never accept this is true!!)

Anzai's brain denied it with all its might. It was similar to the thought pattern that led to late detection of cancer. His fear was getting in the way.

"I was asking how you were going to explain this absurd phenomenon."

"S-someone painted them on as a prank. Look, it's so obvious on that red arrow."

"That arrow looks black to me."

"Then you must be crazy."

"That I cannot accept! Do not lower your estimation of me to explain this realistically!!"

"I don't believe in it, so this doesn't matter. It doesn't matter which arrow I follow. It's just a coincidence if I happen to follow the pink love comedy arrow!!" shouted Anzai as he ran full speed down the hallway.

But the next oddity was waiting for him not even 15 seconds later.

Rounded, goat-like horns.

Thin, bat-like wings.

A pointed, arrow-like tail.

A little girl with all those things and wearing a leather outfit cut across the hallway.

"Wh-what the heeeeeeeeeeeeeel!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!???"

He had seen her before.

She had been in the short film about the hero and the demon king.

But because of what that would mean, the logical part of Anzai's mind rejected it completely.

This was not a computer virus or a brain implant. It was pure fantasy. A different sort of feeling of rejection assaulted him.

"What now?" asked Kozue. At some point, she had become the questioner. "How will you describe the absurd phenomenon you see before your very eyes?"

“A theatre club?”

“I see you are keeping things nice and safe. But how did they make the wings move so much like a real living creature’s?”

“Ehh? W-was it really all that realistic? I thought it looked like styrofoam... heh...eh heh heh...”

“Now you are altering your memories because there is no footage to prove you wrong!?”

After that, they ran across a carnivorous plant so large it could likely swallow a human whole, a kunoichi with SF technology, a jealous Japanese goddess, a stubborn sushi chef, and other absurdities. However, Anzai would not accept them. He refused to accept them. With that desperate mindset, Anzai found a way to realistically explain away each and every one of them. He was afraid of accepting even one of them because he felt he would be dragged into some fantastical alternate world if he did.

In exasperation, Kozue said, “I think it is unfair to explain any of them away with ‘special makeup’. You have used that explanation for most of them.”

“If only it was video footage, then I could claim it was CG. Seeing it in person is a pain in the ass.”

“You may be able to get by each individual one like this, but can you explain how it all fits together. Why would the theatre club be dressed up in special makeup and acting en masse to trick you?”

“Uuh...!? U-um...”

“If you cannot explain that, then your theories lose some credibility. Hee hee. And then you will have to believe me about the fairy I saw. Hee hee.”

“M-maybe this is all part of that professor’s plan and this is part of a continuing psychological experiment centered around that survey.”

“Oh?”

“Or maybe this kind of thing happens frequently around the professor, so he made short films based on them to look for any mental changes in the viewers or to see how well they could withstand-...Ah!?”

“I see. Hee hee.”

“No! That doesn’t deny the premise!! These absurdities don’t exist! They just don’t!! Basing the short films on something that doesn’t exist doesn’t explain this! The easiest explanation would be to say you’re behind all of it, Kozue!!”

“Would you please stop placing me in the villain’s role whenever you run out of ideas!?”

Anzai forced himself to focus on the realistic goal of a supermarket bento, so he had no choice but to deny all of those psychedelic digressions. He had a feeling the fact that he “had no choice” but to deny it meant he was cornered, but he did not want to face it all head on.

If he did, he had a feeling his brain would be overcome by eccentric thought patterns like “The neighborhood cat has been a bit unfriendly of late → Is it related to the sinking of the lost continent of Mu!? →Japan is in danger of sinking!!”

That was why he had to deny it all.

He could feel something crumbling at the edges of his explanations, but he still had to deny it all.

He was pretty sure that demon king’s wings were not made of styrofoam, but he had to deny it all.

Anzai (and Kozue who was following him for some reason) finally made it outside the school building. However...

“What now?”

“ ... ”

Anzai felt a great blast of air.

However, it was not the wind blowing. It was the flow of air created by a giant object moving. Anzai felt the same feeling on his cheek as when a subway train approached the station.

It was caused by...

What Anzai saw walking between the buildings beyond the campus was...

“How do you explain that?”

“...It only appeared for an instant.”

“How do you deny that?”

“It appeared for an instant in the story involving a magical girl and heroes wearing tights! It’s hard to tell what this is!! It would have been easier if it had simply been the magical girl!!”

“That certainly looks like a giant combining robot to me. I can think of no other way to describe it.”

“...”

The robot looked their way with the sound of whirring motors.

It looked as if it would soon head for the university campus.

He had to explain it.

Any explanation would do. Special makeup, a mass of cardboard boxes, or maybe a new weapon from the JSDF. He just had to come up with any reason at all that he was mistaken in thinking what he saw was (something like) a giant robot 20 meters tall walking his way.

“I do not see how you can explain this.”

“No, I can do it!! In a way, I want to deny giant robots more than fairies!! If it’s real, there are endless questions about its design like why something that big would be walking on two legs, so denying it has to be simpler!!”

“I still do not see how you can do so. I am going to run away, but I will tell you the quickest method of denying it.”

“What is it?”

“Let it step on you. If it does not crush you, you have proof that it is made of cardboard boxes or styrofoam. Then I am sure you can easily deny that giant robot.”

Aisu's Case

Part 1

“Oh, you got similar results to me. I guess strange things do happen sometimes,” said the girl with the 21st century name of Aisu.

Before Anzai could say anything in response, Harumi stuck her hand into the air and said, “That was completely different from me.”

“It was nothing like mine either,” said Kozue.

“Can’t we talk about this after we get to the coffee shop? They like to close up if they get a chance, so we need to hurry,” said Hotaru.

And so they left the auditorium.

The campus coffee shop was part of an international chain, but it was famous for ignoring its official hours and closing up early.

“Oh, have you heard the rumors about the secret menu there?”

“I thought that was nothing more than the manager failing at making an espresso and trying to pass it off as some secret drink.”

“...Huh?” said Anzai.

He stuck his hands in his pockets, and then checked in his small bag.

It was not there.

“Did I leave my cell phone somewhere?”

“Is it in the auditorium, perhaps?” asked Aisu, but Anzai shook his head.

“No, I don’t remember looking at it during the survey. ...Maybe it’s in the lecture hall.”

“Can you search for it using GPS?”

“I’ve turned off all the tracking functions. Those kinds of things scare me.”

“You sound like a virgin girl,” commented Harumi.

Anzai scratched at his head and said, “I’m gonna go check the school building. Sorry, but I’ll have to skip out on the coffee shop.”

“Eh?”

“Harumi, given the circumstances, we can’t stop him.”

“I think I should help him.”

“Oh, dear. Having him walking through the dark with just Kozue would put him in too much danger, so I think I should go too.”

Anzai wanted to deal with the cell phone problem as soon as possible, so he gave a casual goodbye to the girls and left. He walked down the chilly and almost entirely pitch black path. Normally, it might have seemed a bit creepy, but the pressing realistic concern swept anything of that sort away.

He then heard a voice from behind him.

“Hey, wait up!”

“?”

He turned around to find the (tanned) cabaret club girl named Aisu jogging up from behind. And Kozue was with her.

“What?”

“Kozue’s kind heart (with an ulterior motive hidden below) would not let her relax, so just let us help out.”

“That is not true.” Kozue seemed a bit sullen. “And I would like for you to stop using me as cushioning to soften the blow whenever something makes you embarrassed.”

“Mgh!? Wh-what are you talking about!? Ga ha ha!!”

“Whenever that cushioning habit of yours shows itself, the level of danger you attribute to me shoots up without end! The people hanging around me might be public safety officials!”

“Oh, but it is true that you follow people around, Kozu-...Gyah gyah gyah!?”

Aisu let out a static-like scream when Kozue used her small hands to dishevel the cabaret club girl’s hair.

“I see. So why are *you* here?” Anzai asked Aisu.

“Hm? I just don’t often get a chance to enter a liberal arts building.”

“No fair! You always take the cool answer for yourself!”

“Stop, stop!! A-anyway, it was just curiosity. Ha ha ha!!”

That must have meant Aisu was in the sciences. Despite looking like a cabaret club girl. But she would have looked out of places in liberal arts as well.

“Surprised?”

“I guess...” said Anzai noncommittally. “Hotaru...-san was it? The tall one with the black hair. She’s the one I would have assumed was in the sciences.”

“Despite how she looks, Hotaru is quite the romanticist. Her major is French literature.”

“Now, that’s surprising.”

“Yes, she would look more at home creating artificial humans in some creepy lab.”

The way they could say such horrible things so casually likely meant they had either known each other a long time or knew each other really well.

“Harumi and Hotaru went on to the coffee shop. If they did not grab a table, the manager really would close up. Let’s find your phone and get back so we can talk.”

“Eh? We’re still doing the coffee shop?”

As they spoke, Anzai and the two girls entered the university building. Since graduate students would sleep over year round, the door was not locked and a smattering of rooms had the lights on.

“By the way, what is your major?” asked Aisu.

“Sociology. But I’m a freshman, so I’m still taking nothing but general education.”

“You’re a freshman?”

“It took two years before I made it into the university.”

“General education courses, hm? When I first got here, I was surprised to find you had to take a physical education class. Putting on a track suit and running long distance is not what I would call intelligent.”

“Kozue, do not get angry at running just because you have nothing that bounces as you run.”

“It is not intelligent.”

No one was in the lecture hall, but it was not locked. After a short search of the room, Anzai found his cell phone almost too easily. It had fallen below the desk he had been in.

“That is a relief.”

“How about you check the log? You want to make sure no one suspicious entered the passcode.”

Anzai used his thumb to check on some things, but there was no sign of anyone having messed with it.

“Looks fine.”

“Then I will email Harumi and Hotaru to tell them we are on our way.”

“Come to think of it,” muttered Anzai as they walked back out into the hallway. “Maybe we should report to the office that the auditorium is unlocked. That professor just went off somewhere without dealing with it.”

“It is nearby, so we can easily stop by.”

“The way he gathered the surveys and then disappeared makes me think of the black code stories.”

At any university that was even slightly well known, rumors of that sort would spread. Things like a leading earthquake researcher suddenly disappearing. This university was no exception. It was possible that referring to it as “that university” would be enough for anyone in Japan to know which university you were talking about.

As Aisu typed out the email with her thumb, she said, “Yes, I have heard the story. There are over 1000 reports submitted each year here, but the story goes that there is a shelf filled with the few ones that have contents simply too

dangerous to reveal to the general public.”

“I have heard that one such report contains data taken while investigating the truth behind a certain mysterious killer bacteria,” said Kozue.

“What I heard was that a professor half-jokingly added the question ‘have you ever stabbed someone?’ into a survey he gave his students. He got some unthinkable results and was never seen afterwards,” said Anzai.

While speaking, they had arrived before the office. They could see light coming from around the door, so there must have been at least one worker still there.

Anzai gave a light knock and then entered. When they spoke with the middle-aged woman working there, she frowned and said, “But we never gave authorization to use the auditorium tonight.”

Part 2

“Eh? What, what? Then what was that survey?” asked Harumi in the coffee shop, but Anzai could not answer.

He only knew that no one had been given permission to use the auditorium that day. What that meant, he could not say.

Hotaru frowned and said, “So that professor carried out that survey without informing the university?”

“It’s more than that.” Anzai sighed. “That professor introduced himself as Tanaka-san, remember? Well, there is no professor with that family name in the university.”

“Then who was he?”

“We do not know,” said Aisu with a vague sense of resignation. “It seems some strange old man who has nothing to do with the university came on campus, sent us a notification about the survey, and then carried out the event itself. What I can’t figure out is what he gained from doing all that.”

While mixing a bunch of coffee jelly into her drink, Kozue spoke quietly.

“Our personal information maybe?”

“The only thing he got was our names.”

“You were asleep, right?” said Harumi. “After the survey ended, that professor said something about our numbering for the short films revealing something about the workings of our hearts.”

“But what does that get him?” asked Aisu. “Our addresses and phone numbers is one thing, but how can he make money from learning about our hearts?”

“Exactly,” said Anzai. He could not rid it of all its creepiness, but the mental

burden was lightened by the fact that he could not imagine any real harm that could come of it. “But I am a bit afraid that someone outside the college knew about my lack of credits.”

“So it was the credits for you.”

“Eh? It wasn’t for you four?”

“We had our reasons,” said Hotaru as she averted her gaze.

“What?”

“Just leave it alone,” said Aisu as she tried to gloss over it with a smile.

“What happened with you four?”

“It was something similar to your situation. Do not worry about it,” said Kozue clearly.

“I want to know what exactly happened.”

“Ah ha ha ha ha ha...!”

Harumi tried to get by with just laughing.

In the end, none of them would answer him. The world was a cold place.

Aisu quickly changed the subject.

“Anyway, the woman in the office was saying they needed to look into this, so it would probably be faster if we just waited for them to come up with an answer.”

The others agreed with her.

And even if they never learned who that professor had been, Anzai doubted it would put them in any danger. If the office workers discovered who he was, that was great. If they were unable to do so, they would all forget about it over time. That was all that came of strange happenings like that.

...Or so Anzai thought.

Part 3

Mysterious things did happen.

Nothing could be done about that.

It was the same as a case of bad timing such as making a cake in cooking class, going to lunch and finding the school lunch had cake for dessert, and then heading home to find a cake there. You did not control your schedule, so you could not keep such things from happening.

But what exactly had happened here?

Anzai would soon find the answer.

Part 4

“Uuh...”

Anzai awoke to the sound of an alarm clock.

He instinctually reached out to stop the noisy clock, but then he realized something.

(What is going on?)

Anzai used the timer on his cell phone to wake himself up. He did not use an alarm clock.

Once his sleep-addled mind regained the ability to think, he realized that was hardly the main problem.

He was not within his apartment.

He was lying on the hard floor and his body ached as a result. The rectangular room was quite dark, but it was not completely dark. A faint light came from one wall. It seemed a window was covered by a curtain.

“Wait. Is this...?”

He was not in a proper living environment like an apartment. Nor did it seem like a business space like a family restaurant or convenience store. However, he recognized it. It was not any kind of special area.

Yes.

“Is this the university?”

He wondered why he was back there. However, the desire to get out of there was much stronger. It was similar to how someone in a burning house desired to escape to some safe place more than wracking their brains and trying to figure out what had caused the fire.

Did that mean being there was dangerous?

Anzai decided to put that question off until he had left too, and he tried to stand up.

As he did, he heard a metallic clanking noise.

It was the sound of a chain moving.

Something like a wristwatch was attached to his left wrist. He touched it in the dim light and realized it was similar to a handcuff. However, the chain was quite long. It was about a meter long, and it led to...

For some reason, Aisu was lying on the floor just like Anzai and she was wearing a ridiculously skimpy V-shaped swimsuit that left most of her skin bare.

“.....
What?”

He was pretty sure it was called a slingshot swimsuit. The V-shaped swimsuit made of a pink synthetic material was the kind of thing only allowed in the isolated world of pinup magazines, so seeing it up close brought on an urge to laugh more than it seemed sexy.

However, that was no time to be laughing.

In fact, even smiling would be a bad thing in his position.

They were one on one in that extreme situation. All sorts of misunderstandings were certain to occur. If the other three girls from the day before had been there too, he might have suffered fewer misunderstandings. However, the other three did not appear to be around.

“But...”

(What the hell happened? How did I end up in the perfect environment to end up on the receiving end of the world’s lamest false accusations!?)

Even if he put great efforts into resolving the situation, he doubted it would be worthy of a Hollywood movie and he had a feeling he would only find an extremely dissatisfying conclusion if he did manage to get to the bottom of it all. Anzai instinctually tried to move away from Aisu, but the fact that their wrists were connected by that chain caused this to be his downfall.

Anzai’s movements pulled on Aisu’s wrist which provided a stimulus to Aisu’s

consciousness.

“Uuh...”

She said the same thing as she woke up as he had.

For instant – just an instant – Anzai seriously considered performing a karate chop to the side of her neck in an attempt to put her back to sleep, but he managed to stop himself.

And then the gates of hell opened wide.

At first, Aisu frowned in confusion and looked around. Then, she realized something was off about how she was dressed. When she had grasped the gist of the situation, her entire face grew beet red.

"Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhh!? So it wasn't a
dreeeeeeeeeeeaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaammmmmmmmmmmmmm!

“Eh!? So you woke up before me and passed out again from the choc-... gbvheh!?”

After having resisted the karate chop, Anzai received a full force blow. (Aisu -> Equip -> E. Fallen Alarm Clock)

As he gained the extremely rare experience of passing out from a blow to the face, Anzai began to seriously question his earlier decision.

Part 5

Now, a question.

“It seems this is a classroom at the university. I’ve only taken general education courses, so I’ve never been in a room this small. Also, it is 8 AM. The teachers should be here already. Some of the hastier students might be here too. The upperclassmen who spent the night here writing their thesis are definitely here. However, the main rush of students arriving should be between 8:30 and 9:00. In other words, we have only half an hour left.”

“...So if we do not find a change of clothes in that time, I will be forced to provide a fanservice scene to the entire university while handcuffed to you?”

“It will of course be a major problem if you leave the building dressed like that. That is why we must find the important item ‘Cotton Clothes’ somewhere in the building.”

“It seems to me there are some clothes right here. You are wearing some, right? At least let me borrow your shirt!! It does not matter if a guy is topless. You will just look like you are in a kung fu movie!!”

“There is one problem with that, Miss Aisu.”

“Hm? Huh? The buttons of your shirt are glued shut with instant glue!?”

“My pants and belt are too. I only just realized it. It seems whoever set this up is intent on having a spy action thriller featuring a girl in a skimpy swimsuit running around the school building.”

“I will never forgive whoever did this!! I cannot believe this!! I know, I can wrap the curtain around me...Ahh!? I just tugged lightly on this thick curtain and it started falling apart!!”

Anzai guessed it had either been corroded with some kind of chemical or switched out with an easily tear-able material while they slept.

Whoever had set it up had been quite thorough, but what meaning was there in doing it all?

In fact, who had done it?

“Th-there is nothing else I can cover myself with!”

“There’s some kind of memo card over there. It might have been left by some professor.”

“Let’s see... ‘If what I am seeing is reality, then I require people who can be called Ab. Busters. I have gathered too much of it to oppose it. That is why I need new people to act as Ab. Busters and...’ Argh, I don’t care! This is tiny!! I can’t hide anything with this tiny memo card! My palm is bigger than this!!”

In her anger, Aisu ripped the memo card to shreds and threw away the pieces.

(Should she really have done that? I don’t really get what’s going on here, but I feel like that was essential information needed as a prologue to whatever is going on here...)

“But where are we supposed to find a change of clothes? Do you have any ideas?”

Unlike middle school or high school, one did not have a “home classroom” in universities, so there was no custom of leaving your personal items anywhere. That changed somewhat for those in specific seminars or graduate students who were constantly going to and from a specific laboratory, but Anzai was taking almost nothing but general education courses, so he was unfamiliar with those near personal spaces.

Aisu wrapped her arms around herself to hide her body, but Anzai had a feeling that it actually made various places stick out more.

She let out a low moan and said, “...Ugh. If we made it to the club activities building, we might find some tracks suits or uniforms.”

“Are you in a club?”

“Yes, the West Francia-Style Dueling Revival Club.”

Anzai was not quite sure what a club like that would actually do, but he swore

in his heart not to make any more jokes that could make her want to harm him. He just hoped it was actually a cultural club.

“But the club activities building is a fair distance away from this building.”

“Also, the keys to the club rooms are kept in the teachers’ office, so the teachers would see us...”

“Then we need another option.”

“But there is nowhere else that people leave personal things.”

“Then what about somewhere with clothes that aren’t personally owned? ... Hmm, like the cafeteria maybe?”

“?”

“I’m guessing it’s for health reasons, but the cooks all wear track suits and aprons, right? The best outfit is hats and clothes of thin synthetic materials like the people working at a semiconductor fabrication plant, but the customers probably don’t want the cooks looking like they are covered in chemicals.”

“Meaning?”

“Those are not privately owned. Most likely, several sets are left in the kitchen.”

“Yes!! Well done!!”

“Gyaahhhh!? Just because you’ve overcome with joy is no reason to come over and embrace me dressed like that!”

Aisu came back to her senses and delivered a completely unfair slap. They then began to head out.

...But first, Anzai asked a question just to be sure.

“What about your friends from yesterday? Harumi and the other two. Can’t you contact them and have them bring by a change of clothes?”

“No. Not at all. If they found out I was wandering around the school dressed like this, the world would crumble violently.”

And so, the spy action thriller began with (someone with no relation to Anzai’s) life hanging in the balance. He headed out while dragging along Aisu,

the demon king who had arrived in the 21st century.

The chain was relatively long, so Anzai would go ahead to make sure it was safe and then Aisu would follow him with her body balled up.

At a corner of the hallway, Anzai caught a glimpse of long white hair. It appeared a *girl of about 12* had turned in their direction, but she did not seem to notice them.

(...Isn't this a university?)

It was a slightly absurd sight, but he had no time to pay it any heed. What mattered was that no one else was there. The girl from before had disappeared. It seemed safe to head down the chilly morning hallway.

"...It looks fine."

"Let's just get this stupid emergency situation over with."

"But you should probably stay crouched down as you walk. If you stand up, someone could spot you through the hallway windows."

Anzai and Aisu resisted the urge to shout and run at full speed, and instead moved slowly and silently through the hallway. Naturally, Anzai's heart was pounding, too. If Aisu screwed up and began crying in this situation, he had a feeling his life would be ruined regardless of the proper context of the situation.

"What floor are we on?"

"From what I can see out the windows, it looks like the third floor. I can tell by how high up from the ground we are."

"The cafeteria is on the first floor."

"This is easier to hide along than a hallway that heads straight there. It does raise the risk of suddenly running into someone, but...wait. Shh!"

"Gyaaaaahhhh!? Footsteps are headed this way!!"

As they approached the stairway, they heard footsteps from below. Anzai and Aisu realized they would be spotted, so they frantically changed their plan and headed upstairs. With just their heads sticking out from the landing, they observed the situation.

“(They are going to stop at the third floor, right!? If they keep heading up, we will be spotted! Maybe we should set up a ‘wet floor’ sign!)”

“(And what kind of adventure are you planning to take on the way to get that sign!? What we need to do is check above! If someone starts coming down, we’ll have nowhere to run!)”

The two meaninglessly waved their hands around as they argued, but luckily the owner of the footsteps stopped at the third floor. From what they could see of the person’s back, it appeared to be Professor Shinagawa, a stubborn madame who was the subject of a dubious rumor that she would no longer give any credits to girls who wore heavy makeup.

“I-if she had spotted us, we would have been dead.”

“...I think I might have seriously been buried under a campus cherry tree.”

However, they had no choice but to head on now that their path forward was open.

Anzai and Aisu headed down to the first floor from the landing between the third and fourth floors.

On the way, Anzai suddenly asked, “So who do you think set this up?”

“Well, I cannot think of much that connects us. In fact, we had never met until yesterday.”

“So...” Anzai knew the idea had several flaws, but he voiced it nevertheless. “It was Harumi, Hotaru, or Kozue?”

“No,” readily denied Aisu. It was not that she had any actual evidence of that. “No matter how they may seem, they do know what lines not to cross. With something this extreme, we can rule them out. This isn’t something a best friend of the type elementary schoolers dream of would do.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. If it does turn out to be them, I will stab them.”

That outrageous statement was said without hesitation.

It scared Anzai how girls would occasionally go on the offensive in such crazy

ways. Regardless of how deep the wound actually was, they never let anything go like it was a fishing hook stabbed into them. Anzai legitimately could not tell if she had been joking or not.

“But do we have any connection other than them?” he asked.

“Well...” Aisu trailed off before she could continue.

At first, Anzai thought it was because they had safely made it down to the first floor, but she was acting oddly.

As Anzai poked his head out from the stairway area to check on the hallway, Aisu spoke to him from behind in her ridiculous swimsuit.

“Um, I just realized something.”

“What?”

“...The cafeteria is all the way on the other end of the building. That means we have to pass through the entrance area in the center of the building.”

“...”

It was 8:10.

Not much time was left until the 8:30 rush.

“S-so should we head back up to the second floor, head across the building, and then head back down using the stairway on the other side?”

“I’d like to, but...wait, wait! I hear footsteps approaching from up the stairs!!”

Like they were building a pyramid of playing cards, their frantically put together plan was sent crumbling down from a large shock. With their hand forced by the situation, they headed out into the hallway without being sure it was safe.

And once they had headed forward, they had no choice but to keep on in that direction.

Hesitation would only raise the risk of failure.

“I think that professor from the survey is the most suspicious!” said Aisu as she moved along while crouched down.

“Why?”

“That survey is the only connection between us besides Harumi, Kozue, and Hotaru.”

“But why us? There were a bunch of participants.”

It was possible there were other pairs sneaking along in other parts of the university, but Anzai decided to ignore the possibility as they had no proof of it.

With her arms wrapped around her own body, Aisu looked around and said, “Do you remember what we learned yesterday? Our results on the survey were an exact match. We were probably the only two for that to happen to.”

“Do you have any evidence of that?”

“It is a simple issue of mathematics. What do you think the odds of getting an exact match on an ordering of 24 short films is?”

“Eh? Um, uh....? I-I can do math with a calculator, I swear!!”

“You can use a calculator if you want, but just do the calculations!!” Aisu’s face reddened further, this time from something other than embarrassment. “The answer is about 10 to the 23rd power x $\frac{1}{6}$. The denominator is something beyond trillion and quadrillion, so I do not know what to call it, but it is an extremely small chance.”

“...I-I didn’t realize it was such an amazing thing.”

“Of course, the odds are not 0, so it is possible there is a third person, but... well...that would practically be a miracle. Just two is amazing enough.”

Hearing that, Anzai did start to feel like the result of the survey was more important than the fact that he had spoken with the other girls.

Then again, it was possible the odds of meeting a specific person were lower than ordering 24 short films in the same way.

“...We have made it to the red zone minefield.”

“You seem calmer. Have your senses numbed over?”

They were at the entrance area. At the current time, this was the area they had the greatest chance of running across someone else in.

Some universities were different, but this one still used the indoor slippers system. In other words, the entrance had shoe lockers lined up. It was likely to ensure the expensive research equipment and old books were not ruined by dirt. Taking off your shoes before entering the specific rooms seemed more popular, but the professors here seemed worried that any dirt in the building could get in under the doors.

However, students went to different buildings depending on where their class was, so no one had their own locker. You put your shoes in an arbitrary locker and then put on a pair of communal slippers.

Just as before, Anzai went ahead and poked his head out to see if it was safe to proceed.

“I don’t see anyone...”

The next thing he knew, Aisu shoved him violently from behind. He was forced out into the area between rows of lockers.

He realized what was going on before he could complain.

He heard some girls talking in the space beyond the next row of lockers.

“Harumi, you’re here early.”

“I changed my bank account, so I have to tell the people in the office to change where they withdraw my tuition from. All this procedural stuff is so annoying. Why are you here, Hotaru-san?”

“No real reason. That main road is usually a lot more crowded, but there was hardly any traffic today.”

The personal boss characters who they could least let find out had appeared.

Because there was only a row of lockers between them, the actual distance between them was about 60 cm.

Just to make sure, Anzai asked, “...What happens if they find out?”

“The world will be destroyed.”

She was sticking with that.

The problem was that there was nothing proactive they could do about it.

They could only pray that Harumi and Hotaru would leave.

And of course, the world was not so kind as to give them that complete safety.

In the next instant, Anzai's cell phone started ringing out of nowhere.

Their silent hiding was all for naught. Also, Aisu panicked and screamed.

"Vaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhll

But once he regained some calm, Anzai realized Harumi and Hotaru had no way of knowing what his ringtone sounded like, so there was no real problem with them hearing it. The real problem was...

“Huh? I just heard Aisu’s voice.”

“At this rate, we’re going to find Kozue here, too.”

Anzai heard their footsteps approaching as they spoke. They were clearly circling around the row of lockers.

The two girls were just thinking to give their usual greeting, but Anzai and Aisu could not let that happen.

Knowing full well she had brought the situation on herself, Aisu grabbed at Anzai's collar with both hands in a burst of anger.

“(Why didn’t you turn that off!?)”

“(But this was clearly your fault-...gweh!!)”

If they stayed where they were, Harumi and Hotaru would spot them, the spy action thriller would end in failure, and the world would apparently be destroyed. Since the two girls were circling around the back side of the row of lockers, Anzai and Aisu circled around the front.

“Huh?”

“Where did she go?”

As they heard Harumi and Hotaru's voices from beyond the lockers, they ran out of the entrance area. They headed down the hallway and to the cafeteria.

The cafeteria opened just before noon and the food preparation began at

around 10, so the place was likely empty. After making it through the most dangerous area at the entrance, they had nothing left to fear.

They charged from the hallway and into the cafeteria.

The kitchen was about 30 meters away.

“This somehow feels like a continuation of the survey.”

“?”

“It is just that the form of the questions has changed. Do we head down the stairs or head through the hallway? Do we pass through the entranceway or do we circle around it? It feels like a collection of small questions like that.”

And once again they were clearing the questions together.

“But what for?”

“Well, we do not even know what the survey itself was for. But from the professor’s previous actions, it seems to me he wants to have others do something for his own ends.”

Did that mean the survey was question 1, the swimsuit issue was question 2, and questions three and four would continue after that?

How long would it last?

What was it a preparation for and what was it screening for?

Or would they have accomplished whatever the professor’s goal was simply by completing all of the questions?

“So are we supposed to defeat the evil demon king?”

“Any world that has wearing a slingshot swimsuit as a criterion for being the hero can be destroyed for all I care,” said Aisu while pouting. “But if he is creating these absurd situations in the hopes that we will make it through them, he might be looking for people with certain specialized skills.”

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe he desperately needs people with the ability to oppose all forms of the absurd. It may not be anything as crazy as fighting a demon king or the galactic UFO space fleet, but perhaps there is some other gigantic absurdity.”

Whatever the case, they had to clear the second question first.

Anzai and Aisu headed through the cafeteria and to the kitchen. They headed to the back and found a storage space. It doubled as a break area, so it had tall, narrow lockers, a table, and a TV.

They found what they had come for in one of the lockers.

The people who worked in the cafeteria always wore the same track suits and aprons.

“O-ohhhhhhh!! There really is an apron in here! This is definitely the goal!!”

“Then hurry up and put it on.”

Anzai tried to act cool, but he was actually a bit reluctant to part with Aisu’s slingshot swimsuit. However, he had a feeling he would get a clenched fist in return if he said that out loud, so he kept silent.

Meanwhile, Aisu seemed overly delighted at having avoided that dangerous situation.

“An apron! An apron! An apron! An apron! ...An apron?”

For some reason, she added a question mark the last time.

Anzai frowned and noticed that Aisu’s face had gone pale.

“...Um, there is nothing but an apron in here.”

“Eh!? What happened to the track suit!? Did that professor hide it!?”

Incidentally, the professor had left a memo card. It said, “This apron contains a chemical that is harmless to humans. The instant the swimsuit touches the cloth of the apron, it will corrode and fall to pieces.”

It was too soon to start thinking about the third question.

The choices for the second question were not yet over.

Would she put the apron on? Or would she not?

From a standpoint purely focused on the surface area covered, she should unhesitatingly put on the apron.

However, was it right to throw away the small but at least existent protection

she had from behind?

But was it not also somehow wrong to now decide that the slingshot swimsuit was fine?

Now then.

Which decision do you think is correct?

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Afterword

Hello, this is Kamachi Kazuma.

Sometimes I will come up with an idea that I cannot put into one of my current series. When enough of those had piled up, I decided to write a book using them. Each individual idea could probably be expanded into a whole book, but that brings about the issue of writing too many series to handle at once.

It's possible a book expanding on one of these ideas will come out later, but that is undecided for now.

Okay, this afterword will be done by chapter!! I have a feeling this afterword is going to use the term "moe" more than any of my previous ones, but the primary themes in this book were moe and love comedy, so there is no use running from it. ...Come to think of it, this afterword will probably get a bit long.

File 01: A Computer Virus That Has Been Spreading of Late

This anthropomorphization came about from a desire to make computer viruses moe to counteract how scary they can be. I know naked eye 3D is not such an amazing thing that you would be dreaming about it, but it can be used as a nice gimmick in fiction.

It might be fun to create different types of characters for different types of malware, like a download bar or a key logger.

File 02: Please Feel Free to Consult with Us (But Use at Your Own Risk)

When you think about it, a world where you can use a computer to search for a marriage partner is pretty amazing. This idea developed from that concept. Because this is a light novel, it led to an elf and a little girl who speaks like an old woman, but in reality, it would probably lead to a mafia daughter or a beautiful investor. Then again, thinking you would find someone beautiful might be leaving the realm of reality...

File 03: By Any Means Necessary

One of this novel's few serious stories. In my mind, the organization here is not some country's intelligence agency. Instead, I view it as a company that can be hired to interrogate people.

Sagittarius's specialty intentionally draws himself in as well in order to disrupt the atmosphere of the scene, but one wrong step can lead to himself being swallowed whole.

So who is more twisted? Sagittarius who uses temporary attachment and trust to get his way or Scorpio who uses direct violence?

File 04: Ninja Art – Sleep Diver Technique ©

Ninja ideas have a way of periodically smoldering within me. When I was thinking of what to write about next, this idea came to me. But strangely enough, I was unable to expand it into a larger story.

I got as far as having the Iga and Kouga acting as something like Japanese intelligence agencies in the modern day who are in a development race over ninja goods. When I researched on metamaterials, I found it to be scarier than I did interesting. Does that mean I am not able to keep up with the current age?

Still, bending lasers seems to have more romance to it than camouflage. Perhaps that is because things like ABLs seem unrealistic (at least for now).

Also, having the protagonist be a perverted peeping tom of an old man who

has no battle ability at all is more or less unheard of in light novels. That is something else I can only get away with in a short story.

File 05: Watch Out for New Types of Scams

As I do not smoke, I honestly do not know who supervises roadside smoking. It's the same with warning buzzers. (They are not the same as sirens. They make a high-pitched electronic beeping that provides no sense of urgency.) You think you understand it, but there are a surprising number of details you are unaware of.

Speaking of scams and something mentioned in another story, manuals to control a human's mental state are really amazing. Maybe I could do a story about a specialist who makes manuals special made to a requested individual. It could be for a president, a spy, or a stubborn girl.

File 06: 385D

At first it looks like an idea based around numbers, but it turns into something else. This started out as an idea about a mysterious young woman in a café who is seen as a valuable link to some different world by a completely normal boy. Just as the boy has experienced strange incidents related to 385D, the woman holds the reigns of the word "job" and she resolves various incidents. It could be fun to add in enemy characters who are related to words like "mystery" or "organization".

Anytime you start paying too much attention to numbers such as doubles, it is a sign that your heart is weary, so be careful.

File 07: A Comfortable Casket for You

A casket story. Actually, the thing about "the influential science magazine

Planet” at the beginning is the real heart of the story. Getting the basic premise across as quickly and simply as possible is standard, but I wonder if that worked well enough.

There are various ways of making it immediately obvious that something is a creature from a different world. For example, you can add wings or horns. However, if you stray too far from the human form, you have struck a fatal blow to any moe aspects. The safest way to avoid that is to keep the overall form the same, but just shrink the size down. A convenient way to create that impact is by having the character look the same as a human but carrying out actions that humans do not do such as entering a shop through the cat door.

By the way, is there anyone in this world who has no problem with the dentist’s drill?

File 08: The Clogging Time Lodes

A time machine story. This story came about when I was thinking about the cliché of clichés that is a future world where the resources have dried up. I started to wonder if you could write a story about creating a link to the past in the timeline to deal with the dried up resources.

The one real problem with time machines is that the story cannot progress if there is no one who is aware of the before and after changes, but it is not easy to come up with a reason why your characters would not be affected by it. That is why I added a quick reference to that.

File 09: Even Matters of Hell are Decided with Cash?

This idea about hell came about from the fact that businesses sometimes run prisons or carry out punishments. Having the priest be worldly, having the punishments be absolutely ridiculous, and having the ghost be a beautiful girl were all efforts to rid it of any real feeling of hopelessness.

While the corpse of a beauty seems wrong even in fiction, a beautiful ghost

can be perfectly moe. How very strange.

Also, using a ghost could be convenient because I would not even need to explain away any use of clothes like buruma that have almost completely disappeared from the modern world but are still popular for some reason. Of course, that would require having the ghost be from an earlier decade.

File 10: Destiny Takes the Form of an Arrow

This came from an idea about a protagonist who could decide whether he would face horror or love comedy by which arrow he followed. At the same time, I could add in some meta jokes about the distinctions between genres.

In light novels, a beautiful upperclassman is the default sign of an amazing person. That is one of my favorite types of characters. But if you actually ran across a beautiful, glamorous, and skilled upperclassman who had never dated anyone before as if waiting for the protagonist, you would definitely assume there was something unpleasant about that upperclassman like a fruit covered in some kind of preservative. It is strange how the idea gains appeal when used in fiction.

File 11: A Girl Arrived as Collateral on an Unrepaid Loan

An absolute cliché. When used in a world of swords and magic, it works well enough, but it just seems oddly out of place when used in the 21st century. The course of the story could change greatly depending on whether the protagonist is lazy or aggressive. By the way, it could also be possible to have the heroine's mother arrive in order to look after her daughter or something. At first, I planned to have that as the ending, but that could turn into a horror story unless it was a very young mother. For that reason, I had it be just the grandchildren.

File 12: A Santa Claus Trained as a Gentleman Thief

This began with the thought that it might be fun to have a Santa who specialized in sneaking into impregnable mansions. Since he would not be stealing anything or defeating anyone within, the story could even be made for quite a young target audience. It could also be good to make a version with a beautiful girl Santa and two (male) reindeer servants. By the way, the reason Mimi-chan's father hates Santa so much is that he spotted the real Santa as a child and received no presents from that point on.

Santa is a simple moe symbol and by having "Santa" in the title, people can guess about what kind of characters will be in it without even reading the summary. This makes it a very "safe" genre from a sales perspective, but it has one flaw.

It is exceedingly hard to make a series when your protagonist only does anything once a year.

You would have to make your main characters immortal (or maybe just stop the flow of time like in certain prime time anime featuring a family with a marine product name or a blue robot) or make the story such that the characters act on days other than Christmas as well.

File 13: How About We Try Taking a Peek?

This idea expanded from the thought that handheld game systems these days were so convenient you can use them for anything. (I have even played a part in the handheld game and smartphone businesses...) This time, it's a western hell. Instead of actually seeing hell with the handheld game system, the boy is being tempted by the demon named Ashtart. By throwing Gabriel in as well, it takes the form of the stereotypical angel and demon whispering in the protagonist's ears.

I think demons have more appeal than angels as far as moe aspects go, but that may just be my subconscious desire for more revealing outfits. You see a lot of female demons, but female angels are a lot less common.

...By the way, if you had the chance to see the real hell, would you take a

peek?

File 14: Would You Like Something from the Human Face Series?

This idea branched off from the idea of cyborgs. I thought of this while trying to come up with a solution to the problem that removing the human form from a cyborg dealt a fatal blow to any moe-ness.

When you look closely at some dentures someone has taken out to wash, doesn't it just seem so real that it makes you feel like your common knowledge is failing you?

File 15: Better Made than the Real Deal

When you look into it, the creation of imitation sake, steam, and sweat used in dramas is quite interesting. You would think they want something that looks just like the real thing, but the viewers would think it looked wrong even if they used the real thing. The idea of making something that looked more real than the real thing sounded like it could be expanded into a light novel dealing with the occult. Something like preparing a temporary offering and temple to summon something.

File 16: Those Spoken of in Legends

The story of a hero and demon king who have had friendship blossom between them as they fought. After playing for so many hours, they have both completely forgotten what their goals are.

When it comes to RPGs, I can be very greedy, so I have thought up a few businesses you could set up. One of those is the armed hero delivery service mentioned in the story. I've also thought of something like an inn set up one step away from the demon king's castle. The inn would be reliant on the demon

king not being defeated.

File 17: Attribute Colors for the Palette

At first, my idea was to have everything decided by the extent to which the characters represented an attribute, but displaying “extent” as a concrete parameter is difficult. That is why I shifted the idea to the number of attributes. I also like the idea of a world that prevents crime by rewarding the good rather than cracking down on the evil. However, can it truly be called “good” to turn away and not do anything about those who do evil things?

It also could have been fun to make it a world where writing power (?) is represented by a clear number. (The small fry characters would have low numbers and they would give very sloppy explanations of things. The description of the heroine could take up half a page.)

File 18: Chef Koitarou's Insatiable Challenge

This idea expanded from the thought that a cooking light novel would work best if the work of a single cook would decide the fate of the world. I’m not sure I have ever before seen the idea of providing something even more delicious to eternally avert the enemy’s focus rather than defeating the enemy.

...I suppose the one major problem is that the chef makes the food but there is no one to say that it is delicious. That somehow makes it all feel so empty.

File 19: A Unification of Standards is Urgent Business

The theme here is transformation heroes. I like the idea of a security buzzer that calls in a hero because I could see a toy like that actually being made. I’m not really sure if magical girls still use wands in this day and age, but any other form would require an explanation as to why it was shaped like that.

It might have been good to have the father at the end “transform” into a dandy company worker by putting on a toupee.

File 20: All Sorts of Offerings

A Japanese mythology story. It all might have been easier to imagine if I had used western gods like Zeus and Odin rather than Japanese gods. The idea of “I smell another woman’s perfume” has become about as common a “seasonal term” as the clothespin or the pencil cap with a hole in it. Here, I have used that in the form of offerings.

...I wonder if a local god really would view that as cheating?

File 21: Let's Think Up a Romantic Language of Flowers Meaning

You sometimes come across surprising things in the language of flowers. Like the Western European-style grape. I thought it would be fun to show the scene of someone seriously worrying about various things when thinking that up.

I just do not find girls who end their sentences in “~ssu” to be very moe^[2], but it is one of the easiest-to-pick-up-on sentence enders alongside things like “~gozaru”. I once mentioned that “~gozaru” was not moe to my editor, but he said it could be if it was a blonde foreign girl who mistook it for proper Japanese. I really had the scales fall from eyes there. ...Maybe there is a way to use the fundoshi as well.

But then, perhaps it is just a universal truth that a beautiful girl will look cute doing pretty much anything.

File 22: The World's Most Enjoyable Lesson?

It was something I just happened to write in the story, but I really liked the line about “Micro” not being the JIS mark.

Even after all the explanations, I still wonder if black holes are really safe, but maybe I am just being left behind by the times.

File 23: This Time the Ice Age is Real

This idea started with amazement that we had real time translation software on handheld game systems and with how many amazing things smartphones can do.

Those kinds of apps tend to be like a supplement. I think it is normal to search for things to fill the gaps where you yourself are lacking. But if everyone does that to enough of an extent, no one will have any individuality.

...Perhaps having faults is important.

File 24: How to Defeat a Powerful Enemy That Does Not Exceed Human Understanding

A story about using human greed as a new method of exterminating monsters. But with the more grotesque aspects like the abridged description of opening up and checking through the inside of the troll, this could be a difficult story to expand on. It may have been a bit milder if it was the story of someone in the jungle observing their target through binoculars to find out if it could be used in any way. And by actually heading out to the scene, I could add in some action-y bits of danger.

As one creature's population shrinking can lead to the population of that animal's prey increasing, the professor's methods have a different risk.

The Introduction to the Participants at the end had something akin to the compatibility quizzes often seen in magazines that use yes or no questions. With the contents of the survey and the survey itself, "the absurd" was used as the theme of the entire novel. It is a common term, but it is one of those terms

that looks like a technical term when given an arbitrary term in furigana, isn't it?^[3]

Having the opening of that part be so low key was to create enough of a contrast to make it clear the story had left the “play within a play”. This meant that story had to get off to a slow start.

I guess I will stop there.

I give my thanks to my editor Miki-san, my illustrator Haimura-san, and all of you readers.

I used a gimmick to give the whole thing an uneasy feel to it. I did not technically use any psychological tricks or anything though, so don't worry about it too much. Everything was fiction from beginning to end.

...If my ideas pile up enough again, I might make another one of these, but I doubt that will happen anytime soon.

Anyway...

The next assignment is to research the water and soil that makes seeds grow.

-Kamachi Kazuma

Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ Nandeyanen is the classic tsukkomi in the Kansai dialect
2. ↑ The girl in this story ended her sentences in “~ssu”.
3. ↑ Throughout the endings, the Japanese term for absurd had the English word given in furigana.